BEYOND ONTOLOGICAL JEWISHNESS: A PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION
ON THE STUDY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN JEWS AND THE SOCIAL
PROBLEMS OF THE JEWISH AND HUMAN SCIENCES

A Dissertation
Submitted to
the Temple University Graduate Board

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By
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May, 2012

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The present dissertation is a case study in applied phenomenology, specifically the postcolonial phenomenology of racism theorized by Lewis Gordon and applied to scholarly studies conducted on African American Jews and their kinfolk. My thesis is the following: *Presumptively ontological human natures cannot function axiomatically for humanistic research on African American Jews. A humanistic science of Africana Jews must foreground the lived social worlds that permit such Jews to appear as ordinary expressions of humanity.* The basic premise here is that subaltern (or denied) humanity exists in a neocolonial social world by virtue of a kind of ordinariness that supervenes on humanity. For example, the more historians consider Africana Jews as ordinary, the more Africana Jews’ humanity will appear. And the more human Africana Jews appear, the more inhuman their extraordinary appearance appears. This symbiosis constitutes a basic existential condition. When research on Africana Jews ignores this condition, it succumbs to ontological Jewishness and other concepts rooted in what postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon calls the “colonial natural attitude.”

After introducing the reader to the basic procedures of postcolonial phenomenology, the study will proceed according to three phenomenological
reductions. In the first reduction, I use several cases of artifactual analysis to disprove the assertion that a “Jewish artifact,” by definition, simply is evidence of Jewish history. This claim is a fallacy of ontological equivalence. In the second reduction I utilize Gordon’s theory of coextensivity to show how artifacts can be interpreted in many ways, including non-ontological ones. In the third and final reduction, I appeal to a variety of artifactual sources to construct a non-ontological rendering of pre-abolition African American Jewish history. I conclude the study by introducing the reader to varieties of non-ontological Jewishness, varieties demonstrating that Jews as Jews can engage in constructive praxis while resisting the temptations of ontological Jewishness.

This dissertation therefore challenges any approach to Jewish Studies scholarship that ontologically privileges European, African or other cultural geneses. If such cultural geneses are phenomenologically suspended and if subaltern Jews’ ordinariness is methodologically foregrounded, then new historically Jewish humanities will emerge, humanities that in terms of people, may far outnumber those that dominant scholarship holds as presently constituting the global Jewish population. This emerging Jewish world, a Hebrew-Israeli social world of racial and sexual heterogeneities, subaltern spiritualities and supervenient humanities, is the world I contend the humanistic Jewish sciences must explore. But in order to do so, those sciences must reckon with the challenge of this dissertation. They must suspend any and all ontological judgments about which individuals and/or groups should and should not be considered a historically authentic Jewish people.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have contributed to making this dissertation possible. There are sections of it I began to write while both working as a teacher and attending classes as an undergraduate student at Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach, Florida. These early pages were penned in response to a series of intra-family discussions about our identity that I had been having with my parents, uncles and aunts for years up until that point. For this reason, the people who have informed the ideas contained herein reach back into my childhood. My acknowledgments should begin with them.

Thanks goes to my many teachers and mentors growing up in the Nassau and Duval County Public Schools: Ms. Rainey, Mr. Blue, Mr. Cook, Ms. Johnson, Ms. Haywood-Harris, Ms. Melton, Ms. Ammons, Ms. Mason, Mr. Springer, Ms. Stover, Ms. Albert, Ms. Grant, Ms. Jones, Mr. Kepner, Mr. Pope, Mr. Mobley, Ms. Fisher, Ms. Parrish, Ms. Wilson, Ms. Avery, Mr. Key, Ms. Thompson, Ms. Williams, Mr. Mason, Ms. Matilda Bagby, Mr. G. Allen Rushing and many others. It is often forgotten that many of these people, raised under the dogma of Jim Crow segregation, were themselves never trained to teach Black students, Latina/o students, or for that matter, any racially integrated classes at all. Yet it was their responsibility to teach us to neglect many of the lessons about race they had learned at our age. Given those restraints, I do believe that some of the people I mention here, blacks as well as whites,
performed incredible services to the human family. Despite some of their own personal misgivings about racial others, many of them awoke too early each morning and left to go home too late in the evening so that we, the youngest people in our community, could live in a better world than they had been born into. This, I think, constituted nothing less than an irreplaceable lesson in courage to my post-Jim Crow generation. Change sometimes takes courage, and my childhood instructors gave it to me, as they did with so many others. It is unfortunate that we live in an era where the gifts of public school teachers are all too often taken for granted and rarely given the societal praise and appreciation they deserve. But each one of you should know that you have left an indelible impact on my life, and I thank you tremendously for the time and energy you invested in the cultivation of my humanity.

An additional thanks goes to my teachers in undergraduate and graduate schools: James Brooks, with whom an inspiring conversation was usually but an open door away; Christopher Miller, whose insightful readings of postcolonial texts introduced me to the writings of Frantz Fanon; Randolph Crump Miller (Peace Be), whose morning conversations enlightened me about Process Theology and its potential for a constructive relationship with Liberation Theology; David Kelsey, whose clear lectures, wonderful sense of humor and keen eye for academic rigor provided for me a model of a committed religious intellectual; Robert Wilson, who taught me to appreciate the power of tradition in the establishment and redaction of written sacred texts; Victoria Hoffer, who gave me an appreciation for the
grammatical particularities of Biblical Hebrew; Bruce Haynes, whose kind guidance in helping me locate manuscripts and conduct interviews helped cultivate in me a love of archival research and a respect for the role of museums and rare book rooms; Jacob Meskin, whose comments on my papers and love for Levinas opened me up to new possibilities regarding the integration of philosophical work and religious texts; Sol Schimmel, who taught me to have a deep appreciation for what I do not know and what I doubt, especially as they relate to people with whom I vehemently disagree; Scott Sokol, whose compassionate pedagogy introduced me to the world of instructing others in rabbinic liturgy and prayer; Barry Mesch, who always expressed confidence in me, even when few others did so; Zain Abdullah, whose seminar in African American Islam proved to me that my experiences were not unique and whose verbal encouragement during this process helped me far more than he will ever know; Terry Rey, whose spiritual smile always made me feel welcome, even when my papers were late; Vasiliki Limberis, whose kind words and compassionate instruction helped me gain a knowledge and appreciation for postmodern readings of traditional religious texts; Khalid Blankinship, who advised me while I was taking classes at Temple, with whom I always felt a special “Egyptian connection,” and whose presence in the classroom was often an invitation to enjoy each day just a little more.

I would like to extend a special thanks to the following academic mentors, people with whom I spent an inordinate amount of time discussing issues related to the topics contained in this dissertation. Thanks goes to Stephen Carter, my
undergraduate instructor in Philosophy. Dr. Carter introduced me to the world of philosophical thought by giving a lecture on Rene Descartes’ philosophy and the Catholic Church. The day I heard this lecture back in 1996 was the day I changed my major to Religion and Philosophy. I read new philosophy titles for him, and as his teaching intern, he taught me instructional techniques in the teaching of Logic, Greek and the History of Philosophy. I am forever indebted to his care and instruction. Thank you, Dr. Carter, for everything. Thanks goes to Sheila Lester.

You need to know that I have incorporated some of your theatrical exercises into my teaching, and so your instructional habits have continued to be spread around the world. Thank you for your compassion, knowledge and sensitivity. I would also like to thank Winifred Johnson. During my sojourn in Daytona Beach, you spent many afternoons answering my questions about what it meant to be black. I listened, carefully, to your answers and expertise, and you should know that our time together always meant something far more than what I could express in words. You changed my life for the better, and I will continually be grateful for it. A “thank you” also goes to Letty Russell. I have met few human beings with a kinder heart, more genuine compassion and tremendous empathy than this feminist theologian of the first rank. Thank you, Letty, for introducing me to the worlds of global feminist thought and its historic impact on all of us. A very big thanks should also be extended to Gilbert Bond, a world-class professor and mentor I am proud to have known and will always respect and admire with the utmost of my ability. It was Dr. Bond’s course in the “Phenomenology of African American Religion” that introduced
me to value of phenomenology for the human sciences, and it was his gentle encouragement to pursue more questions about Afro-Jewish history that led to the quality and passion behind this dissertation. Last but not least, a huge thanks goes to Miriam Peskowitz, my instructor in the Rabbinic Civilizations seminar at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. It’s not every day that a single person changes one’s view of almost *everything* about a certain topic. But you did that for me. In our conversations, you clarified for me a number of lingering questions I had about traditional rabbinic texts, questions that remained largely outside my personal sphere of influence but questions that were important for me to answer before the present dissertation could be completed. In addition, your insight into the relationships between archaeology and Jewish history provided invaluable inspiration for me when I doubted that this project could ever be finished. I credit some of the dissertation’s more insightful readings to the impact your work had on me as a scholar, but even more so, as a human being. I will be eternally in your debt, and you should know that I am eternally proud to have had you for an instructor.

Over the years, my interest in this dissertation’s topic spawned fascinating conversations, some long, some very brief. But they came from numerous peoples embedded in various communities of African American Jews, Hebrews, Israelites and their kinfolk. These people deserve my thanks. A great deal of what is contained in this dissertation reflects their ideas about being Hebrew-Israelites as well as their other intellectual contributions to humanity. I hope I have done them service. If not, let it be known that their philosophical contributions to human
understandings of religious culture may, in the end, far outweigh what small
addition the present dissertation makes to religious scholarship. Thanks goes to the
following Israelites in particular: Andre Key, Khadijah O. Miller, William Z. Scott,
Jehu A. Crowdy, Jr., Aaron Roberts, Judah Roberts, Jerry Reed, Christine Reed,
Michael Hunt, Joseph Turner, Samuel J. Eaves, John H. Eaves, Shlomo Ben Levi,
Meka’el Ben Israel, Shahanna McKinney, Oliver Wendel Holmes, Carolivia Herron,
Nathaniel Okafor-Ogbaji, Debra and Earl Bowen, Rhoda Benson, Capers Funnye,
Curtis Caldwell, Bill Pinkney, Shalomim Halahawi, Michael Ben Levi, Rudolph
Windsor, Hailu Moshe Paris, and Zadok Ben Lewi.

I was also fortunate enough to have constructive conversations with many
who have, in one way or another, “embraced” the African American Jewish, Hebrew
and Israelite community. When given opportunities to shun and avoid me, each of
these persons made conscious decisions to engage my interest, and despite what
they had heard about Black Hebrews, offer constructive criticism through
conversations, e-mail exchanges, phone calls, letters and/or a simple word of
encouragement. For that, the following people have my gratitude and thanks: Chima
Korieh, James Landing (Peace Be), Shaye Cohen, Jonathan Schorsch, Aviva Ben-Ur,
Rachel Frankel, David Rabeeya, Steven Copeland, David Watt, “Craig,” Robert Wright,
Gershom Sizomu, Emmanuel (Manny) Viñas, Rabson Wuriga, Ephraim Isaac, Ben
Begleiter, Diana Swancutt, Junius Johnson, Serene Jones, Kwame Ture (Stokely
Carmichael, Peace Be), April Rosenblum, Jaime Lara, Greg Graham, Frank Castro,
Nzinga Metzger, Crescent Mason, Dina Solomon, Paget Henry, Cornel West, Martin

X
Kilson, David Blumenthal, Lior Levy, Neil Roberts, Clayborn Carson, Camille
Monahan, Nicholas Otieno-Odongo, Anthony Monteiro, Douglas Ficek, Molefi Asante,
Maulana Karenga, David Ross Fryer, Kenneth Knies, Mercy Amba Oduyoye,
Demetrius Semien, Siobhan Brooks, Cheryl Greenberg, Trevor Eppehimer, Marc Ellis,
Gary and Diane Tobin, Zack Pall and the New Haven Interracial Dialogue Project,
Barry Altman, Gerald (Jerry) Brieger, Mark and Hayley Melamut, and Janice
Fernheimer.

A great deal of the work for this dissertation was conducted in the midst of multiple personal trials I experienced in the last decade. During some of these trials, I learned that few things in life are more valuable than a friendly smile that makes one feel safe. Both Janice Anthony and Linda Jenkins provided me with smiles and assistance when there was trouble in the middle of the valley. I am eternally grateful for their wonderful contributions to my happiness. Navigator Dennis Wojciechowski and the staff at Marquette University's Sterling Library provided invaluable assistance by editing the document’s photographs, figures and captions. In addition to Ms. Anthony, Ms. Jenkins and Mr. Wojciechowski, I would like to thank the following non-committee advisors who, also for the simple sake of being kind and friendly, wrote both critical and encouraging comments on sections of earlier drafts: Michael Monahan, Jodi Melamed, Melissa Shew, Laurence Thomas, Zack Pall, James Ponet, Thomas Meyer, and Jane Gordon. All of you offered invaluable insights and good criticisms of my work. You should know that your assistance has paid off, and my writing has improved because of it.
Of all those connected to this project, there were three who had a
disproportionate impact on the final outcome. These three are the members of my
dissertation advisory committee: Rebecca Alpert, Laura Levitt and Lewis Gordon.
There is so much to say about each of these persons that I fear what little I mention
here will insufficiency represent the depth of appreciation I have for all of them.
Perhaps the most important thing to say is that, first and foremost, I love all of them
equally and beyond measure. About this there should be no confusion. Each of
them, in their own way and despite good reason to do otherwise, has lovingly
embraced me both as a student and a fellow worker for a better, more humane
world. It is the latter commitment, infused with moral fortitude and intellectual
acumen, that is a rare enough phenomenon. But to find multiple numbers of such
people, willing to work together to collaboratively embrace someone such as myself,
is an even greater rarity. I thank all of you for doing so. To Rebecca, thank you for
the numerous pieces of advice and guidance along the way. Many times I found
myself wandering the halls of the department, thinking about some obscure issue
related to Religious Studies, but the sight of your open door and your subsequent
smile alone was often enough to give me a moment’s reprieve from aimless
philosophical meanderings and provide for me a sharper, more realistic sense of
direction and purpose for my studies. Our conversations contained lessons I will
never forget, and Lauren and I will always remember the joy you brought into our
lives when our lives came together. I hope this dissertation is one of which you are
proud to be associated. To Laura, thank you so much for helping me learn about the
ins and outs of academic life. Since we first met, few things in my life have been as stable as your support of me and your belief that I could do something that made a positive difference in the worlds of Jewish peoples. Yes, you may have tried to push me farther than I wanted to go at times. But I always understood why you did so and why it was important. Difficult human problems cannot be erased overnight, no matter how much we want them to disappear. Most of the time, when we create such problems, we may not even be aware of it, until it is too late. I have done this in my own life, and the critical self-awareness necessary to see when one does it is an indispensable part of personal and intellectual maturity. Thank you for helping me to see that. It is a lesson I promise to never forget. I hope this dissertation is one that you too will be proud to be associated with. Finally, thanks goes to Lewis, a friend of all friends and mentor of all mentors. It has been my pleasure to have you guide me through this process. Above all, your insistence that I learn to speak up for myself is what I take away the most. You know that blacks from my background and blacks from yours can be very different in how they respond to social problems. You taught me that it is okay to speak my mind, if what I have to say can potentially make the world a better place. Such a simple lesson... but it is a lesson I'm still learning from you. Thank you for making me a better human being; thank you for making me a better Israelite. And again, I hope that for you too, this dissertation is one that you will be proud to be associated with. To all three persons on my advisory committee: “Thanks,” again! It is unfortunate that, due to mental health concerns, I felt it important to leave Philadelphia when I did. My departure
interrupted what could have blossomed into a much more fruitful set of dialogues and scholarly exchanges. Nevertheless, I am very proud of the fact that all of you have remained in support of my work. I hope that what I have produced will do justice to the spiritually and intellectually nurturing roles each of you have played in my adult life.

A special thanks goes out to all the professionals and workers involved in keeping the following institutions running. Their patience and service was always exceptional and professional, and my attempts to learn their systems, operate their machines, and wade through their many archived documents served as an unforgettable set of life experiences that I will always remember: Barbour County Court House, 1 Court Square, Clayton, AL 36106; Henry County Court House, 101 Court Square, Suite- B, Abbeville, AL 36310; Madison County Court House, 125 SW Range Avenue, Madison, FL 32340; Houston County Courthouse, 200 Carl Vinson Parkway, Warner Robins, GA 31088; The Randolph Room, Randolph County Public Library, 106 Pearl Street, Cuthbert, GA 39840; Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, 2100 Park Place, Birmingham, AL 35203; State Archives of Florida, R.A. Gray Building, 500 South Bronough Street, Tallahassee, FL 32399; State Archives, Kansas Historical Society, 6425 SW 6th Avenue, Topeka, KS 66615; Department of Special Collections and Archives, Kent State University, 1125 Risman Drive, Kent, OH 44242; Alabama Department of Archives and History, 624 Washington Ave., Montgomery, AL 36130; Georgia Archives, 5800 Jonesboro Road, Morrow, GA 30260; National Archives of Atlanta.

XIV
One of the most crucial resources in my research was the advice I received from the hundreds of people I contacted in African American Hebrew temples, synagogues, churches, camps and tabernacles. Hebrew-Israelite congregations are perhaps some of the most underappreciated gems of hospitality to be found in contemporary American Judaism. Over the course of fifteen years, nearly all of the congregations below were visited for purposes of learning the histories, worship styles and religious performances of various Afro-Jewish and Israelite traditions. Some of them required numerous visits by the author in order for him to learn their rituals well enough to garner a participant’s understanding of their liturgical cultures. As a result, I am thankful to all these communities of faith for the learning opportunities they granted to me. They welcomed me with open arms and overwhelmingly supported my efforts to write this dissertation. I will never forget their hospitality, their many words of encouragement and the support I received from the other African American Jews and Israelites I encountered at their services.
and events. Their smiles and constant words of wisdom proved to me that the project was not only worth pursuing to the end, but also that living human beings believed that such a project could help their many different perspectives be better understood by those outside of our community. I do hope this dissertation is a study with which they would be proud to be associated: Temple Beth El - Headquarters, 3927 Bridge Road, Suffolk, VA 23435; First Tabernacle, 105 Dodge Street, Providence, RI 02903; First Tabernacle, 602-14 S. Broad Street, Philadelphia, PA 19146; Seventh Tabernacle, 3944 Cass Street, Cincinnati, OH 45223; Twenty-First Tabernacle, 427 S. 7th Avenue, Mount Vernon, NY 10550; Ninth Tabernacle, 85-87 Fountain Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11208; First Tabernacle, 343 Meeker Avenue, Newark, NJ 07112; Tenth Tabernacle, 2683 NW 65th Street, Miami, FL 33147; First Tabernacle, 3401 Stuart Street, Jacksonville, FL 32209; Third Tabernacle, 829 Albany Avenue, Hartford, CT 06112; Second Tabernacle, 748 Connecticut Avenue, Bridgeport, CT 06607; First Tabernacle, 124 Ivy Street, New Haven, CT 06511; B’nai Adath Col Beth Yisrael, 1006 Greene Ave, Brooklyn, NY 11221; Beth Elohim Hebrew Congregation, 189-31 Linden Blvd. Saint Albans, NY 11412; Beth Shalom Hebrew Congregation 730 Willoughby Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11206; Mount Horeb Congregation 1042 Rev. James Polite Avenue, Bronx, NY 10459; Sh’ma Yisrael Hebrew Israelite Congregation, 297 Saratoga Ave., Brooklyn, NY 11233; Camp Kadosh Community, Inc. 380 Valley Road, New Haven, CT 06515; United Congregation of Israelites in Jamaica, 92 Duke Street, Kingston, Jamaica; Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim, 90 Hasell Street, Charleston, SC 29401; Congregation Beth
Finally, an invaluable thanks goes to both the ancestors and the living members of my family. In a very real sense, without many of them, this dissertation would not have been possible: Jonah Isaac, Mary Davis, William Taylor, Ida Wilson, “Papa” David Wilson, Amanda Wilson, Alfred Richardson, Lou Richardson, James Houser, Elizabeth Houser, Essex Means, Rebecca Means, Shedrick Haslam, Mollie Haslam, Alf Richardson, Jr., Anna Jordan, Willie Means, Lula Haslam Means, “Grandpa” Walter Isaac, Willie Solomon Isaac, Jonah Mac Isaac, Rose Isaac Tillman, Thomas Isaac, Ivory Isaac, Ovit Isaac, Hildegard Strauss, Susan Braunstein, Joshua Braunstein, Frank Richardson, Leara “Belle” Means, Benjamin Isaac, Lillie Mae Richardson, and my other supportive family members—Sean, Angie, Emily, Shauna, Lyndon, Theresa, Jared, Benjamin, Tracy, Janice, and the entire Page, Wilson, Taylor, Simmons and Isaac families combined. A special thanks goes out to Donna Hunt Isaac, a woman of unusual intelligence and strength. You traveled with me to cities far and wide across the eastern United States, accompanying me as my research progressed. You helped me follow leads, meet new people and re-write early drafts of this manuscript. You taught me to never “sweat the small stuff,” and your
constant, caring presence in my life was something I will never forget. Thank you so much for everything.

And to my life partner, Lauren. You stuck with me through thick and thin as this process wore us both down. But it was tremendously inspiring for me to see that in the midst of all this weariness, you never wavered one iota in your dedication to us living our lives together as one. And that kind of love, once found, is irreplaceable, unrepeatable and must be embraced for as long as one has strength. I love you with all my heart. ~Your beloved, Y. Y. bn Avraham.
PREFACE

Subaltern Jews are not ontological forms. They exist themselves as cyphers that supervene on the symbolic forms of humanity. What follows is an account of how I, a so-called “Black Hebrew,” came to this conclusion.

Around the age of five, a rather formative experience took place in my life. At the time I remember sitting on the floor next to the bed in the master bedroom of my parents’ recently purchased home. I had a few sheets of plain construction paper in front of me, and on them I was using crayons to draw multiple Magen David (Stars of David). My mother eventually walked into the bedroom and leaned over my shoulder to see what I was doing.

“What are you drawing?” she asked, “Stars?”

I nodded my head in affirmation, saying “Yes. I like these stars.”

But upon closer inspection, my mother corrected me, believing I had made a mistake. “But those aren’t real stars,” she said, “those are our stars.” Having never heard anyone speak of a star in terms of possession, I remember being confused, and so my mother tried to clarify herself. “Son, you’re trying to draw a star like your brother. But his star has five points. The one you drew has six points. See?..” she said as she used her finger to point out and count aloud the number of points on one of my drawings. “One... Two... Three... Four... Five... Six... What you drew is a Star of David, and that’s not a real star.”
Although unknown to my mother at the time, I had already recognized the difference between the stars I was drawing and those my brother had sketched a couple of days earlier. I simply thought my stars were superior. But I was still very confused, because if my stars were not “real” stars, then why would my mother use the phrase “Star of David” in reference to them. I asked her this, and at that moment, our brief exchange took an unexpected turn. In an effort to justify her contention that I was drawing stars incorrectly, my mother began to explain our family’s ancestral heritage to me.

“We’re Hebrews in this family,” she said. “And that’s our Star. We come from the people in the Bible. You know those people I read those stories to you about?.. The Hebrews?.. Those are our people, from way, way back. That’s why you have the last name ‘Isaac.’ But what you drew isn’t a real star. It’s our star... And that’s why they call it the Star of David. Because David was a Hebrew...”

That conversation took place nearly three decades ago. Over the years, it spawned numerous others, and since then, my public life has been characterized by much antagonism to my mother’s initial description of our family. First of all, we were black. Second, we were Seminoles. Third, we lived in Yulee, Florida, a small town outside of Jacksonville that was, ironically, named after a famous African American Jewish senator.

It should be understood that the black folks who raised me were very socially conservative and traditional, even as compared to other Southerners I lived around. In the area where I was raised, many indigenous practices of enslaved African
people could still be found, maintained for the most part in family rituals and small, rural churches. Unlike many of my black childhood friends, however, I also had access to living narratives about family members who were born as slaves. For three generations straight, people in my family gave birth to children well into their middle adult and older years, which meant that I had great-grandparents who were born well before 1850. As a child, I remember speaking to family elders who themselves had clear, personal and vivid memories of conversing, interacting and traveling with persons in our family who were former slaves. Even though I was young, at the age of ten or eleven I was nonetheless compelled to listen very carefully to these elders, and as a result I scribbled down many notes from our conversations. Although those childhood scribbles were comprehensible by only a few people other than myself, I always thought it important to save them, and I have kept them ever since.

In addition to my own extended family, I grew up around various other peoples of color in the areas surrounding Yulee: descendants of Africans who worked cotton, rice and sugar plantations in southern Georgia, descendants of maroons on the barrier islands of Georgia, and Native Americans, mostly Creeks or Seminoles, people who constituted a crucial part of the historical narrative of blacks in northern Florida. Also, despite the absence of mountains or valleys, there was in this part of the Deep South an amazing physical geography—swamps, marshes and a low-country savannah, dotted with loblolly and slash pines, needle palms, sycamores, pecans and live oaks, from the latter of which hung clumps of Spanish
moss, swaying in the wind. Growing up, I remember all of this striking my family and I as enchantingly beautiful and somewhat like a magical forest from the novels of Zora Neal Hurston. But in addition to this magic, there was always another side to the post-Jim Crow South in which I was raised.

In addition to the normal social and physical volatility of childhood relationships, my upbringing was characterized by an acute awareness of the mundane reality of racial violence in the rural Deep South. Public shouts of hateful epithets, racist vandalism, burning crosses, racially-motivated assaults and murders, as well as entrenched, segregationist practices were all a part of my childhood, and I as a child accepted them as normal features of ordinary life. In short, anti-black racial violence was such a basic feature of my childhood’s everyday existence that conversations about it rarely took place and public articulations about my family’s “Hebrew” ancestry were superfluous. People didn’t hate me because I was Hebrew. They hated me because I was black.

As a result, discussions about my family’s heritage were invariably intra-family discussions—and even then, only on those rare occasions when extended family would get together, such as at a wedding, funeral or family reunion. During such occasions, my uncle “Mac,” as we called him, would love to spread the stories he had learned about the Jews in our family. He was the unofficial family historian, having kept mental (and sometimes physical) records of everything everyone in our family did—where they moved, who they married, what jobs they performed, where they went to school, etc. Of course, like all family lore, there were always questions
about our heritage that were or were not in dispute. No one disputed that we were descended from “Jews” and “Hebrews.” No one disputed that at least some of these Jews and/or Hebrews were Africans. The disputes arose when the issue of “Jew-ish” people in our family was discussed. I write “Jewish” in quotes because none of the elders—including my Uncle Mac—ever used that term to describe our living family members. We were “Hebrews.” And we were black folk. And not until I was a teenager did I learn that “Jewish” people were either Ashkenazic ancestors or African Sephardic ancestors who could pass as white people in the United States. Apparently, the role these ancestral whites played in the constitution of our family genealogy was something of a taboo subject. For example, I remember being amused by my Aunt Rose, who disputed certain details of my uncle’s genealogy by saying “Mac didn’t know as much as he thought he knew!” The “thought” to which Aunt Rose was alluding was the ascription of full-blooded Ashkenazic ancestry to one of my great, great aunts. “She wasn’t full,” said Aunt Rose. “She was actually half Indian and could pass for white,” implying that Uncle Mac believed Native Americans were the Lost Tribes of Israel. Family discussions such as these—about why we used to be “Jews” and how we came to be “Hebrews”—framed the lenses through which I have always understood my identity. Lest I be misunderstood, it should be clear that my family always embraced multiple narratives—with Hebraica representing only one of many cultural and religious strands. Like most black families, mine was an inherently mixed one. Native Americans, Africans, African Americans, Jews and Arab Americans in my family interacted with a level of
intimacy that could only be sustained by illegal marriages, illicit sexual encounters and secret affairs. The stories about our family excited my adolescent mind, and their telling provided me with a sense of relief from the epidermal schema to which I was subjected daily.

In addition to relieving me from the ordinariness of racism, the mundanity of mixture in my family's narrative profoundly influenced my pre-adolescent understanding of blackness. As a child I noticed that my own concept of blackness differed radically from its depiction in the news and media. The dominant media depictions of blackness often framed the public discourse on race in the South. According to this public discourse, blacks were the phenotypically darkest groups (i.e.-Negroes) among a range of “Colored” people, and “Colored” was basically a reference to everyone who was not white and/or of European phenotype. The understanding of blackness I personally embraced, however, was given to me by my family, and it quite probably emerged in response to the public discourse. I did not think, for example, that racism was offensive to my racial assignment, as much as it was offensive to my humanity, and my humanity was prioritized by my blackness in ways completely removed from how whites understood blackness. Although I do not know the precise moment this concept crystallized in my young consciousness, I do remember having a strong sense that "humanity" was the primary referent of "black" people. And despite not knowing this idea's genesis nor its philosophical justification, I do remember it being closely allied to the notion that all peoples could trace their lineage to Africa. Black people, African people, encompassed all
peoples, therefore, and according to the folk wisdom embraced by my family, white people were also black people who, for some reason or another, were in rebellion against their own African origins. In these ways my family could account for the reality of profound racial violence and discrimination while consistently affirming the humanity of white folks.

These discourses on blackness were particularly important for being able to diagnose the epistemic impact of anti-black racism on the minds of people in the post-Jim Crow South. The vast majority of blacks around which I lived were well aware that dominant constructions of “humanity,” at least those endorsed by white segregationists, did not include human beings like us. Yet it was socially acceptable for people to publicly refer to “humanity” by using the English word, “human.” But as we knew, “humanity” as meant by whites was not the true sense of the term. Their human family often did not include us, and if it did, it did so in an exotic kind of way. In order for the true sense of “human” to emerge, it had to include blacks as well as all other peoples. So in response, many people in my family would simply use the term “black” to signify “human being,” first, and racial stereotype, second. Again, although I’m not sure of the historical origin of these signifying practices, it was clear to me that if a person did not object to whites’ use of the term “humanity” in reference to them, but did object to our use of the term “black” in reference to them, then we could easily see that an antiblack worldview was probably informing their thinking. And so as a child, I remember being predominantly influenced by two basic notions of blackness: (1)-the false, public discourse—that is, blackness as
racial inferior to whiteness; and (2) the truth—that is, blackness as a code word for humanity.

I should like to emphasize that this “truth” was not considered to be radical by any African American person I remember from my childhood. In fact I took it for granted so much that I remember the day I had to cope with the fact of its cultural particularity, a realization I came to after meeting a Chinese American kid in the schoolyard at the age of eleven. This event took place when issues of geography and cultural origins were becoming a more prevalent topic of conversation in our 5th grade, elementary school assignments. As we were talking one day during recess, the young boy helped me to see that my understanding of blackness was far more unusual than I had been led to believe. After casually including my friend amongst the various kinds of people I understood as “black” folk, he firmly and sternly resisted my racial assignment of him.

“Why do you call me black?” he asked.

“Because you are,” I insisted.

At that moment he visibly laughed to himself and said, “No I’m not. Can’t you see that I’m not black?” I paused, turning to him to more closely inspect his phenotype. He struck me as clearly phenotypically Asian and thus appeared to be a non-white kid. (If he was phenotypically white, I probably would not have been surprised at his denial of blackness. But my either/or assumptions about the proper conditions for his response were fallacious. He was both refusing to be considered
white and refusing to be considered black). Did he not know, or so I thought, that he too was considered colored?

“So if you’re not black,” I asked, “then what are you?”

“I’m an American, but I’m also Chinese,” he said.

“Okay, so when I hear you say that,” I responded, “what I hear you saying is that you are a citizen of the United States, but your people, your ancestors—they came from China.”

The young boy thought for a second and then responded with a broad smile.

“Yes!” he said, probably thinking that I finally understood.

Yet immediately upon hearing his “Yes!” I responded with the following retort: “Right! So that makes you black…”

“No!” he insisted. “I’m not black. You’re black…” And at that moment, the young boy’s face immediately turned to a look of pity and sadness. Unfortunately, I do not remember his name, nor do I remember the rest of our exchange, but our mutual bewilderment at misunderstanding fundamental categories of human identity was something that was, admittedly, deeply troubling for me. I remember thinking that if he had said that I was Chinese, then I might have understood his reasoning—mutual recognition, for example. But he did not say this. I understood, or at least I thought I understood, his point as something altogether different. Black people, for him, were a people whose origins could be traced to Africa by phenotypic blackness—i.e. “Negroes.” Chinese people, therefore, were not black. They were a different people altogether. (Right or wrong, this was at least my impression of his
belief. From my perspective, however, he clearly did not understand that what he had been taught about blacks was not what I understood blackness to be about. I was not a “Negro” any more than he was “Chinese” or “American.” I was a human being... and therefore black, not vice versa.

That experience with the Chinese American young man introduced me to a world that was very different from the world of my family's beliefs. It was a world that was not comprised of human beings in collaborative efforts to transcend racial divides established by the violence of segregation. As my ignorant responses to my Chinese American friend revealed, simply because I believed that all people were black did not mean that all people believed it too. What was particularly disturbing in that encounter was the young man's insistence that my racial phenotype somehow revealed my blackness, whereas his phenotype did not reveal his own. Here he was, a non-white person, a person like me, a person who many people would have called “Colored” in my small town, telling me that he was not black. His assertion amounted to an endorsement of white people's racial constructions of Euros, Asians, Africans, etc. In this world, a very new world from my own perspective, national cultures functioned according to the racial logic I was familiar with. But this meant that blacks were not human by virtue of black humanity extending to the farthest reaches of the globe. In this world, there were no black humanities—only particular nationalities with a tinge of blackness—a Black Brit here, a Black Canadian there, and so on. To be clear, I should insist that the problem of this world was not one of nationality as such. The problem was that in this world,
blacks were relegated to being a sub-set of humanity, a sub-set with particular features and characteristics and attributes, many of which were undesirable and few of which were something to be proud of. Blacks in this world were, in a word, ontological.

For instance, at the age of fifteen I remember being excited to have discovered a book about my ethnic heritage in the Jacksonville Public Library. Its title was *The Heritage Seekers: Black Jews in Search of Identity*. Upon learning of the book’s presence, I took it off the shelf and feverishly read it, thinking that I might learn something of value about people with backgrounds similar to my own. And to my relative shock and surprise, I learned that even public libraries were not exempt from holding books and other media that propagated racist depictions of blackness as a sub-set or piece of humanity, as opposed to humanity as such. As a teenager growing up in the post-Jim Crow, still-segregated Deep South, it seemed as though everywhere I turned, I found representations of blackness that were profoundly different from the understandings of it held by the nurturing communities that raised me. Those communities were morally concerned about the human consequences of race-thinking, not the political consequences of it for the people of the United States. And so in response to these concerns, I eventually became suspicious of anything or anyone that made blackness, my blackness, a mere segment of humanity. My blackness was not a property or a possession or a thing. In fact I became particularly critical of any discourse that purported blackness to be anything other than fully human.
In all likelihood, it was this aversion to the schema of race that encouraged me to commit a part of my adult life to the investigation of racial formations in American Jewry. For example, in my interactions with other “Black Hebrews,” I noticed that our groups were often far more racially diverse than liberal, white synagogues.¹ Black Hebrews (or “Hebrew-Israelites” as we are also known) consistently welcomed and cared for me throughout my young adult years. And I understood our community to be a predominantly kind, peaceful people—not the crazed hate-mongers I repeatedly saw represented in the reports of watch-dog groups and larger media outlets. In short, I found black Jews no more or less racist than white Jews. But when reading book after book about Jews of color, I saw the same tropes emerge, again and again, about how Jews of color were prone to racism and how they raised interesting questions about “what it means to be a Jew.” In addition, there was a related, but not identical, problem that haunted my philosophical efforts and plagued my attempts to learn more about people like me. And this problem was the lack of artifacts. No matter what synagogue or library or archive I visited, there always seemed to be a preponderance of artifacts testifying to the presence of a European Jewish Diaspora. Yet when it came to examining materials I associated with an African Jewish Diaspora, the artifacts continued to be either few in number or nonexistent. And time after time, I kept being informed that such a situation was neither endemic to research in the field of Jewish Studies nor

¹ By “diverse” here, I am privileging the categories most often used by both liberal synagogues and social researchers in determining Jewish demographics. Such categories are not limited to those of particular cultural designations such as “Hispanic” or “Ashkenazi.” They also include broader anthropological categories such as “ethnicity,” “race,” and, as will be argued in the present dissertation, “religion.”
indicative of any racial bias in Western scholarship. Instead (or so I was told) it was because no such artifacts were possible. The rationale I encountered when discussing the problem with rabbis, scholars and teachers was almost always circular: One could not have artifacts of an Afro-Jewish population when it was unlikely such a population ever existed. But despite the simple logic behind this assertion, I kept running into one, single fact that always brought it into question... my existence.

I began to wonder, like many other Hebrews and Israelites, whether or not I had grown complacent with racial and ethnic categories of human existence that did not take my own experiences as important or relevant for understanding methodologies in the human sciences from a richer perspective. I had for some time noticed that Hebrew-Israelite groups with which I was associated, particularly some urban ones with a predilection for confrontational behavior and conspiracy theories, were criticized and ridiculed because they imagined the Hebrew Diaspora to include large groups of people who would themselves scoff at their inclusion in our genealogical constructions. Yet, while disagreeing with anyone’s advocacy of racist discourses, I did find our uncanny ability to incorporate other segments of the human family into our own genealogy an unusually potent resource for responding to certain key existential problems of race and racism, particularly the racism of Jews. Our groups’ very contradictions and complexities provided me with a standpoint from which to theorize the expansion of knowledge in the study of American Judaisms, in particular, and perhaps the human sciences in general.
Among my Hebrew-Israelite friends and family, I witnessed powerful strains of thinking that, in some ways, vehemently strove against rescriptions of racist orders of knowledge. Therefore we exhibited a profound capacity to transcend some of the deepest and most popularly racist assumptions about human history and culture to be found in the dominant media. Given these opportunities to examine human responses to dehumanization, I was amazed at the ease with which researchers dismissed our attempts to oppose racism in popular society. So I set out to understand why the study of African American Judaism had persistently failed to illuminate this characteristic of our community. That initial effort would eventually morph into the present dissertation.

Three other experiences in particular stood out during the early years of my academic exploration into these matters. I raise them not only to reveal authorial bias. In many ways, they illustrate the problematic dynamics one encounters when venturing into the impact of race on the study of American Jewry and/or Judaism. The first occurred during my days as an undergraduate student at a predominantly African American liberal arts college in the Deep South. It involved, through no behavioral impropriety on my part, other black people’s refusal to serve me food at a lunch counter in my college’s cafeteria. Although for me there were many instances of my undergraduate experiences that involved racial and religious discrimination, there was something peculiarly painful about this episode. Like other students at the college, I had paid to be placed on the school cafeteria’s meal plan. But whenever I tried to eat in the college’s cafeteria, the workers simply

XXXII
refused to serve me. Later, the cafeteria manager confessed to me that she herself, a woman who had personally experienced the sting of Jim Crow segregation, instructed the cafeteria workers to refuse service to me in particular. Her rationale was straightforward: “Because you come ‘round here callin’ yourself a Jew!” To her credit, she did try to compromise by offering to have my meals served “around the back [door]” of the cafeteria.

The second formative experience took place the same year. Alone, while visiting a congregation on Shabbat in a separate city, I was led out of the synagogue by a police officer. I had done nothing illegal and caused no disturbance. I was dressed appropriately, wearing a yarmulke, donning a tallit and reading from a siddur when, to my surprise, I found myself being approached by a police officer—the first person at the synagogue to speak to me. He requested that I justify why I was there, and in order to avoid being arrested, I complied and simply left the premises. After that experience, it would be nearly ten years before I visited another predominantly white synagogue alone.

The third and final experience occurred approximately four years or so after the first two. By this time, I had moved to New Haven, Connecticut, where I was studying for a graduate degree in Religion at Yale University. While attending school there, I became involved in New Haven’s Interracial Dialogue Project (or IDP), and through that program, helped negotiate a six-week-long series of interracial dialogues between Temple Emanuel, a predominantly white, suburban Reform
synagogues and two urban, Hebrew-Israelite congregations, Temple Beth-El and Kadosh Community, Inc.

To my knowledge, such dialogues are rare in the American Jewish community, and what I learned during the sessions was invaluable. The first lesson I learned was that white Jews were generally more willing to participate in an interracial dialogue of this sort. This was surprising to me because in my experience, it was invariably the Jews of color who, when among themselves, would talk about Jewish racism *ad infinitum*. Yet, when given the opportunity to publicly air their concerns, few of them were willing to do so. But during the very first session of the dialogue, it immediately became apparent why the black Jews were so hesitant to publicly discuss race and racism in the Jewish community: Our conversation about race, Judaism and Jewishness was itself premised on assumptions that made the black Jews’ existence questionable. The very grammar of racially integrating Judaism seemed to give Jews of European derivation a platform on which to take their traditional genealogies of Jewish historical presence for granted. In such an environment, exoticizing Jews of color became difficult to avoid. For example, much of the initial conversation was driven by the non-European Jews being asked questions such as the following:

“Are you really Jewish?”

“Where does your Judaism come from?”

“Did you convert to Judaism or are you born Jews?”

“How long has Judaism been practiced in your families?”

XXXIV
“How long have your congregations been in existence?”

“How are your leaders?.. Do you have a rabbi?”

“Do you keep kosher?”

“Do you observe Shabbat?”

“What about the High Holy days?..”

(Silence... and angry looks on Hebrew-Israelite faces.)

The Hebrew-Israelites (or “Israelites” for short) eventually stopped answering such questions, and the dialogue seemed to break down amidst their frustration with the course of the discussion. With each new question, they became more and more offended. This came as a surprise to some of the members of Temple Emanuel. For them, learning about black Jews was never meant to be offensive. It was simply a moment of discovery in their personal development and adult Jewish education. From their perspective, such questions were necessary in order to learn about Jewish diversity. But from the Israelites’ perspectives, each question presupposed either their nonexistence or their non-Jewish historicity. (The historical legitimacy of European Jews was never questioned.)

“What’s wrong?” a member of the suburban temple asked the Hebrew-Israelites. “Did I say something wrong?”

After a few moments of awkward silence, one of the Israelites responded. “No,” he insisted, “it’s not that you said anything wrong. But one way to think about this is to think about how you yourself would answer the questions you’re asking us. So before you ask your question—and this is not to say that you shouldn’t ask it—
just that before you ask it, you might want to think about how you would answer
that question, and about how other Jews you know would answer that question.
Because in all probability, how you answer that question and how other Jews you
know answer that question is not going to be all that different from how we answer
it.”

“But I have to ask in order to learn,” responded the member of Temple
Emanuel. “I mean, isn’t that the point. Because... and I admit it. I’m ignorant about
all of this. Before Rabbi --------- talked to me about this meeting, I didn’t know
anything about black Israelites except maybe what I’ve read about Ethiopian Jews.
And that’s not you all. And so I’m not trying to offend anybody. I already know what
I think about this stuff. But I’m trying to learn what you think, so I’ll know. So I have
to ask...”

“Yeah, but I think what Brother --------- means,” said the Elder from
Temple Beth-El, “is that questions are welcome, but sometimes they can be difficult
to answer. In our congregation, we are taught to encourage our young people to ask
questions. Every week we have something called ‘Sabbath school,’ and during
Sabbath school we are encouraged to ask any question that comes to mind. Now
even though we ask questions, it is sometimes the case that one of us may ask a
question and not even I will be able to answer it. So it can be hard because there are
questions I myself may have that even I don’t have answers to... So a part of what I
think makes questions difficult is that someone may ask a question for which there
is no consensus at the present time.”
I believe the Elder’s words are instructive for projects far beyond the interracial dialogue he was addressing. Sometimes, questions exist for which there are no definitive answers. But this doesn’t mean that knowledge is impossible. For example, from the time I was young, I had been raised to believe that older blacks could be trusted to never replicate the racism to which they were subjected during the Jim Crow period. This was one basis for my belief in humanity’s blackness. I was also raised to believe that synagogues were ideally places of refuge from anti-Semitic hostility and support from fellow Jews. Yet these “beliefs” were so fundamental to my understanding of the social world that I did not consider them to be beliefs in the ordinary sense of the term. They became for me a kind of dogma. I was certain of their certainty. It is not that I believed them as much as I took them to be fundamental prerequisites for my true beliefs to have any validity at all. They were assumptions that I was very hesitant to doubt, and in that sense catechismal for my social world. But my life took turns that forced me to question the veracity of my catechism. Like my experience with the Chinese American boy on the playground, being policed at both my college cafeteria and the predominantly white synagogue taught me that my dogmas about blacks and Jews were very limited and deeply, deeply flawed. I assumed that other people like me would want to translate their social contexts of shared experiences into a common knowledge of human experiences. But this assumption was mistaken, and in order to learn how it was mistaken, I had to contend with the cultures of my own subscription, black and

XXXVII
Jewish cultures that both made rhetorical appeals to humanistic principles while constantly discarding them in practice.

A number of the problems of being embedded in a racist world have stemmed from the difficulty of finding the right questions to ask in order to address the human problems we already know about. In the case of the interracial dialogue between the three synagogues, the first two weeks' sessions were disproportionately characterized by each group of Jews asking the other group questions which, apart and individually, each group was not asking itself. The groups genuinely had a difficult time seeing the other as anything but an extraordinary form of humanity, despite the wealth of culture and history they had in common. When such human phenomena occur, they are instructive, for they show that addressing the problems of a racist world cannot be accomplished simply by an accumulation of data apart from an acute awareness of the social context. In other words, social problems such as racism demand that one not only understand what categories are being conveyed through people's language. One should know how to acquire this understanding in a way that does not, in the life of the people being studied, violate the means by which they express their own humanity. If the point of humanistic research is to accurately represent the social worlds of humanity, then existential violations of this kind carry the danger of re-inscribing racism into our scholarly endeavors, and reducing racist scholarship is a goal for which all the humanistic sciences should strive. Having sketched the contours of these problems by appealing to a few episodes from my own biography, I hope the
reader will come to see how this dissertation can help the humanistic sciences respond to Jewish racism, Hebrew-Israelite racism and other social problems that constrain the creation of a happy, just and peaceful world for all.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>........................................................................................................</td>
<td>III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>...............................................................................................</td>
<td>V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>........................................................................................................</td>
<td>XIX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>.............................................................................................</td>
<td>XLI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>ONTOLOGICAL JEWISHNESS AND THE STUDY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN JEWS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>ONTOLOGICAL HUMANITY AND THE SOCIAL PROBLEMS OF THE HUMAN SCIENCES</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>ONTOLOGICAL JEWISHNESS AND THE SOCIAL PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETING JEWISH ARTIFACTS</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>ONTOLOGICAL JEWISH HISTORY AND THE SOCIAL PROBLEMS OF CHRONICLING AMERICAN JEWISH SLAVERY</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>BEYOND ONTOLOGICAL JEWISHNESS: TOWARDS AN ABANDONMENT OF AUTHENTICITY IN THE JEWISH AND HUMAN SCIENCES</td>
<td>354</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

REFERENCES CITED ........................................................................................................... 361
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Ashur ben Nathan and Son................................................................. p.164

Figure 2: Sken What Ux...................................................................................... p.170

Figure 3: William Taylor ................................................................................... p.173

Figure 4: Joseph Williams’ map of the Afro-Jewish Diaspora......................... p.184

Figure 5: Arthur Dobrin’s map of the Afro-Jewish Diaspora ......................... p.186

Figure 6.1: First Map of Possible Afro-Jewish Diaspora by James Landing ........p.189

Figure 6.2: Second Map of Possible Afro-Jewish Diaspora by James Landing......p.190

Figure 6.3: Third Map of Possible Afro-Jewish Diaspora by James Landing........p.191

Figure 7: Marriage Record of Sol Isaacs and Pauline Dottenheim................... p.196

Figure 8: Marriage Record of Jonah Isaac and Mary Davis............................ p.203

Figure 9: Paramaribo Sephardic Cemetery....................................................... p.205

Figure 10: Mt. Carmel Missionary Baptist Church, Cocoa, Florida................ p.206

Figure 11: Jewish Congregation, New Haven, Connecticut......................... p.209

Figure 12: Sign for Jewish Congregation, New Haven, Connecticut............. p.209

Figure 13: Christian Congregation, New Haven, Connecticut...................... p.209

Figure 14: Sign for Christian Congregation, New Haven, Connecticut........ p.209

Figure 15: Carolee Rosen’s First Birthday Party............................................... p.255
CHAPTER 1: ONTOLOGICAL JEWISHNESS AND THE STUDY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN JEWS

Introduction

The present dissertation is a work of applied phenomenology, specifically the anti-colonial phenomenology of racism theorized by Lewis Gordon and applied to the studies conducted on African American Jews and their kinfolk. Thus the present work is not a social scientific study on African American Jews, but rather a critically reflective, philosophical analysis of how race and racism have informed the research methods used to study them. As such it not only stands as a contribution of Hebrew Philosophy to recent developments in Postcolonial Phenomenology, Womanist Theory, Jewish Feminist Thought and Subaltern Studies, it also aims to address five prevalent shortcomings of contemporary American Jewish Studies—first, critical studies of race and American Jewry that treat feminist analyses as marginal, not central, to the topic; second, feminist studies of American Jewry that are not informed by critical race analyses of American Jewish racism; third, studies of either “Blacks and Jews” or “Jews and race” that make little or no reference to Jews of color and their contributions to these issues; fourth, research on Jews of color that either minimizes or ignores the topic of Jewish racism altogether; and fifth, scientific studies of Jews and Judaisms that do not foreground the
researchers’ beliefs about both the ordinariness of the researched people’s humanity and those people’s proximity to the researchers’ understandings of mundane sociality.¹

I chose a phenomenological approach in order to address two main hypotheses that informed my inquiry. First, I hypothesized that functioning in human scientific research on Jews in general was a metaphysical grammar privileging the invisibility of

¹ A few definitions: If I am correct, this dissertation also represents the only book-length womanist approach to any dimension of Jewish American antiblack racism. As illustrated in my preface, I do not consider my mother’s Hebrew traditions exempt from what some womanists describe as the mother lode. By “womanist” I am not making an appeal to any assumptions about the gradation of oppression, as in the notion that black women are more oppressed than, say, black men. Nor do I mean to suggest that womanism is necessarily a by-product of feminism. Rather, appears that a supervenient relation, itself unrelated to certain ontological foundations, undergirds many anti-colonial epistemologies, and for this reason, by womanist I simply mean a “politics of social transformation” that enables “the ethical appearance of once subordinated individuals.” The connections between this idea and feminism are deep, yet I do not subscribe to the notion that a philosophically informed critical race analysis cannot meet this broad criterion of womanist and feminist insight. See Lewis Gordon, An Introduction to Africana Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 104; Renee McKenzie, “A Womanist Social Ontology: An Exploration of the Self/Other Relationship in Womanist Religious Scholarship” (Ph.D. dissertation, Temple University, 2005) 2-5. Also, by “American” I do not mean a synonym for the “United States.” Roughly speaking, “American” consists with cultural set types attributable to a large variety of peoples scattered throughout the political and geographic “Americas” and the world, including the Caribbean. Instead of “American,” I prefer the term United Statesian (or, in Spanish, estadounidense) to refer to geographic domains, political boundaries, social spheres and thought-spaces derived from and characteristic of the United States. Although many case examples of artifacts in this study will be drawn from the North American context, this selection is not meant to imply that the analysis of race contained in the present study applies only to United Statesian domains. Finally, I intentionally distinguish the present study from the many works analyzing how Jews of European heritage have been represented as negotiating racial locations in the United States. There are a wide variety of studies on United Statesian Jews and race, as though Jewish racism is an exceptional feature in the everyday life-world of United Statesian Jewry. The present work, however, is one of the few that closely examines a distinctive aspect of American Jewish racism as such—the conceptual, sociological and historiographic tools brought to bear in the academic scholarship representing African American Jewry.
Jews of African genealogical derivation. Second, I hypothesized that the grammatical logic of this invisibility reflected problematic Zeitgeists exemplified in my personal life as an African American Jewish (or, more properly, “Hebrew-Israelite”) descendant of enslaved human beings. In response to these two hypotheses, I needed a research method that would allow me to question and/or bracket them while nonetheless examining them for their truth, their falsity or their reasons for occurring to me at all. Because it is an approach rooted in a refusal to assume what defines a phenomenon prior to its investigation, I believed phenomenology could facilitate a philosophical, rigorous and critical race analysis of research methods in the Jewish and human sciences.

I should like to emphasize that the present study will not segregate the study of Jews from that of humanity. Although the study of human beings does not necessarily entail the study of Jews and vice versa, I will proceed in this investigation by assuming that the study of Jews most relevantly entails the study of humanity. This is not only

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2 For references to episodes from the author’s personal life, please consult the “Preface.” Although I choose to identify myself as a “Hebrew-Israelite,” this should not be understood as an ontological subject location. Rather, it is an existential claim. (For more detail on this distinction, see chapter two.) With respect to the “problematic Zeitgeists,” I am specifically referring to the seemingly intractable problem of “racist Zeitgeists” or the problem of discerning at what point human institutions, which in their genesis may have been created for protecting humanity from the misanthropic forces of oppression, themselves become reincarnations of the oppressive structures they were intended to protect humanity from in the first place. In my personal life, this problem has emerged in at least one straightforward way: institutionalized Jewish racism. How could Jewish institutions, which are intended to protect Jews from racism, themselves be racist in orientation? See Lewis R. Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism (Amherst: Humanity, 1999), 5.

because many Jews are human beings. My assumption derives from the historical observation that the oppression of Jewish humanity has played a crucial role in demonstrating the political and ethical shortcomings of modernity. Among these shortcomings one may include the wholesale liquidation of West African Jewish communities for trans-Atlantic slave labor, the attempted extermination of European Jewry during World War II, the contemporary global proliferation of neo-anti-Semitism emerging under the aegis of anti-Israeli Zionism, and more. As exemplified by these cases, the phenomenological appearance and disappearance of Jewish humanity can reveal the potentially dehumanizing undersides of modern colonialism, including the epistemological neocolonialism exemplified by research that is conceptually reliant on colonial interpretations of human presence. Because of these dynamics, dramatically expanding the concept of “Jewish humanity” for historical and religious scholarship will remain constitutive of the present study’s anti-colonial goals.

In her groundbreaking work, Sephardic Jews in America, historian Aviva Ben-Ur lays a critical foundation for broadening our understanding of Jewish humanity. In that work, she insists that viewing the past from the perspectives of people on the margins of

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4 Frankly, some Jews are not human at all, although it is debatable whether or not the qualifier “Jewish” is a definitional source or function of humanity. An easy example of this is found in the stories of the Bible. Are the literary figures (God, Moses, Miriam, Solomon, Ruth, etc.) contained in Biblical accounts of Jews literally human? I would argue that Jewishness, in this sense, extends to literary realms as well as embodied social realities called “living people.”

5 For more information on this point, see my discussion of ontological humanity and the problems of the human sciences in chapter 2.
the Jewish community can increase one’s understanding of Jewish history. I wholeheartedly agree. Yet I should like to add an observation that will clarify the purpose of the present dissertation. If a theoretical privileging of Jewish marginality is adopted in order to study Jewish history, then the researchers must answer some fundamental questions about their scholarly inquiry. For instance, what does the past look like from a marginal Jewish perspective? Who must be considered marginal here? And what justification do scholars have for labeling any person or group marginal at all? Ben-Ur’s response to these questions is instructive. She insists that margins are often defined by the times in which one conducts research.

Today, many marginal Jews are those Jews who experience “coethnic recognition failure,” and those who experience this failure in the present generation may not do so in the next. As a result, if one studies Jewish history from the margins, then one’s research methods need not stay concretized

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7 In the present dissertation, I will use a phenomenology of race in order to argue for what amounts to a postcolonial standpoint historiography in Jewish religious scholarship. (See chapter three.) This position places me in dialogue with the ideas of feminist philosophers of science. For a comment on the relevance of feminist theory for enslaved people’s marginality, see Sandra Harding, Sciences From Below: Feminisms, Postcolonialities, and Modernities (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 118-119.

8 Ibid., 191-192. For Ben-Ur, the times that can possibly make research on a particular topic more popular have to do with the visibility of the community being researched: “Students of Jewish history are often trained to seek the impact of Jews on broader society. Indeed, this impact is sometimes seen as a justification for studying the topic.” Her point, however, is that even when the impact a minority group has on their reference group does not appear to be visible, studies on the minority group are still worthy of time and energy.

9 Ibid., 188-189.
in the epistemic frameworks of previous academic eras. Times and methods, according to her, do eventually change, and thus one’s methodological posture towards Jewish sociological and historical research should be profoundly receptive to learning.¹⁰

But for many scholars of American Jewish history and culture, learning to see Jewish humanity through marginal historical perspectives has proven difficult at best. In reference to this difficulty, Ben-Ur writes the following.

The phenomenon of scholarly and communal exclusion raises sensitive questions. Why are non-Ashkenazic Jews often overlooked in the broader field of Jewish studies and in the mainstream Jewish community’s portrayal of itself both privately and to the outside world? The simplest explanation is that Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews are not situated at the geographic or ethnic centers of the contemporary Jewish world... In a broader Jewish history context, historians Marina Rustow and Sarah Abrevaya Stein have pointed to the force of Eurocentrism, “laziness,” and “a profound resistance to reconceptualize.” [But...] whether or not one accepts these explanations, the ongoing exclusion of non-Ashkenazic Jews from American Jewish historiography and communal self-representation should be of great concern.¹¹

These statements are revealing, and they appear to be describing a culture of segregation (or in her words, an “ongoing exclusion”) located in the professional field of American Jewish historiography. According to the quote above, despite various efforts to diversify the scholarship on American Jewry, some historians believe “the force of Eurocentrism” lay behind an “ongoing exclusion of non-Ashkenazic Jews” from not only academic, but

¹⁰ Ibid., 7-8, 191-192.

¹¹ Ibid., 5-6.
also “communal” forms of representation. This is tantamount to saying that European discursive practices have, in effect, colonized scholarly representations of American Jewish historical presence. The virtual absence of African American Jewry from most scholarly representations of American Jewish life may not only be considered an example of the “ongoing exclusions” mentioned here; it also suggests that the epistemic situations behind research on Africana Jews should be critically reviewed, particularly as they

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12 Ibid., 5, 145. Later in her work Ben-Ur locates “Jews of Color” as the primary site where “coethnic recognition failure” has occurred in contemporary times. In short, the racial polity of American Judaism is relevant in order to document and interpret American Jewish history. Nevertheless, although Ben-Ur’s approach to American Jewish history makes explicit (1)- the existence of Africana Jewish traditions, (2)- their systemic exclusion from the scholarly literature and (3)- the limitations of her own academic interests, one may be puzzled by her contention that the “vast majority of Jews, both globally and in the United States,” are people of European descent. It seems, then, that even in sincere attempts to surpass the racial ontologies of Jewishness found in various studies of American Jewry, the ontological problems can still be encountered. Ben-Ur may have been led to this conclusion by privileging Jewish census data, but if one’s study methods account for subaltern Jewry, it remains to be seen how the world’s Jewish population can be asserted as predominantly European without more research on how Jewish identities and communities are sustained and maintained outside of Eurocentric conceptual domains. The epistemic (and hence scientific) situation calls for a sociotelic analysis, an approach to research that not only reveals an understanding of how Jews appear in history, but how they disappear as well.

13 The term “Africana” refers to “Africa and its Diaspora”: African, African American, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latin American, Afro-South American, Afro-Asian and Afro-European peoples—in other words, all people of African descent. Thus it primarily refers to the entire human species, but since “African” is the modern way of referring to the phenotypically black peoples of Africa, the term “Africana” will be used to imply that sense as well. It should also be noted that at least inasmuch as “Africana” refers to “African American,” the term (1)- implies a historical connection to modern slavery and trans-Atlantic human trafficking, and therefore (2)- includes populations dispersed throughout North and South Americas. (In other words, African Americans are not primarily a racialized ethnicity geographically located in the United States.)
relate to any assumption that problematizes non-white and/or non-European Jewish existence.\textsuperscript{14}

Although many studies on African American Jews were conducted throughout the twentieth century, only in the last ten years have multiple works appeared that questioned the previous studies’ theoretical assumptions. These assumptions are many in number, yet the present dissertation will focus on only one of them: ontology.\textsuperscript{15} Ontologies of

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\textsuperscript{14} See Elizabeth Potter, \textit{Feminism and the Philosophy of Science: An Introduction} (London: Routledge, 2006), 13; Hava Tirosh-Rothschild, “‘Dare to Know’: Feminism and the Discipline of Jewish Philosophy” in \textit{Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies}, eds. Lynn Davidman and Shelly Tenenbaum (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 91-94. Various epistemic situations could possibly reveal the Eurocentricity of scholarship on African American Jews: how “coethnic recognition” manifests itself in the dominant research on Jews and Judaism; how African American Jews have been represented in this research; how colonial scholarship has denied and/or minimized Africana people’s contributions to various Jewish Diasporic traditions; how historians have made European Jewish-Christian relations the default model for examining relations between Jews and non-Jews in non-European contexts; how those considered “Jewish” persons by some may not be considered “Jewish” persons by others, etc.

\textsuperscript{15} Miriam Peskowitz, “Engendering Jewish Religious History” in \textit{Judaism Since Gender}, eds. Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt (New York: Routledge, 1997), 32-33; also see Sandra Harding, \textit{Sciences From Below}, 126-127. Peskowitz is explicitly concerned about historical and archaeological attempts to reconstruct “an ancient culture in gendered and neocolonial terms.” Her cautionary note is crucial for appreciating the womanist perspective of this study. Although the epistemic situations mentioned in the previous footnote are relevant for contextualizing a study of Jews in the African Diaspora, these situated knowledges have rarely been depicted in the scholarship as manifestations of colonial epistemologies. As a result, researchers have studied Africana Jews without methodologically suspending their ontological commitments to them. It is not, for example, a problem that different people have different understandings of Jewish identity. The methodological problem arises when the researcher explicitly or implicitly commits his or her self to the ontological rigor of these constructions. During such a commitment, the researcher may choose to naturalize the knowledge that some people have of Jewish identity and posit this knowledge as that which all people should have of Jewish identity. This process of naturalization can thereby take the form of ontological commitments to situations that, while seeming to be intrinsic to scholarly negotiations of
Jewish identity comprise a basic assumption underlying nearly all of the published research on African American Jews and Africana Judaisms, and in this dissertation, I will show that despite the various ways researchers of Africana Jewry have understood Jewish peoplehood, their understandings have been bound together by a consistently strong appeal to ontological norms of Jewish identity construction. The ontological dimension of what I call “ontological Jewishness” may be understood as “a covering term that connotes categorical, essentialist, and representational languages” of Jewish people’s life-world. As an alternative to ontological formulations of identity, cultural and religious critic Victor Anderson recommends the discursive adoption of more fluid and context-laden identities such as bell hooks’ “postmodern blackness” or what I might call “postmodern Jewishness.” Both “postmodern blackness” and “postmodern Jewishness” rise from a critique of identities rooted in metaphysical properties, “such that to lack any Jewish historical presence, have actually been disproportionately shaped by the historical forces of European colonial expansion.

16 Victor Anderson, Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism (New York: Continuum, 1995), 11. Although Anderson’s reference concerns specifically ontological blackness, I will demonstrate that his observations about ontology and metaphysics apply equally as well to ontologies of Jewishness and Jewish identity, particularly as represented in those studies most concerned with the topic of black Jews. Also see Potter, Feminism and Philosophy of Science, 9; Laura Levitt, “Rethinking Jewish Feminist Identity/ies: What Difference Can Feminist Theory Make?” in Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age, edited by Steven Kepnes (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 366, 370-371. Levitt writes in acute autobiographical detail about the metaphysics of presence that underlay efforts to ontologize “Jewish feminist” subject locations. Hers is one of the many recent efforts to resist ontological Jewishness using the resources of postmodern theory.

17 Anderson, Beyond Ontological Blackness, 11.
one property renders one a member of a pseudospecies.”18 Thus if a person conceptualizes Jewishness as a set of properties, then the lack of any one of its metaphysical properties would negate or make highly questionable that person’s willingness to ascribe the terms “Jew,” “Jewish,” or “Jewishness” to the intended referent. Theoretically, the same principle would apply to “Hebrews,” “Israelites,” “Hebrew-Israelites” and so on. Appreciating the formative role this metaphysical grammar plays in establishing conceptual frameworks for academic research in Jewish Studies is absolutely crucial for understanding the basic telos of the present dissertation. The reader should note how in my understanding, it is not the case that ontology serves no purpose at all in the Jewish and human sciences. My position insists that in the study of humanity, the recognition that living human beings have and experience an inner life should compel responsible researchers to suspend their ontological commitments before attempting to represent and/or explain human reality. Although historically, a great deal of research in the field of Jewish Studies has naturalized Jewishness by defining it as a metaphysical (read: ontological) presence and/or property, in recent years various scholars have been resisting such moves.19 Philosopher Lewis Gordon states the matter in the following way.

18 Ibid., 12.

19 Ibid., 91. Assimilating metaphysics and ontology is one of Anderson’s criticism’s of James Cone’s theological critique of racism. For other recent examples of resistance to such intellectual efforts, see Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz and Ann Pellegrini, eds. Queer Theory and the Jewish Question (New York: Columbia University, 2003).
The advancement of a [ontological human] nature leads to the notion of lawlike structures on human action before such actions are made. The problem is that it places our relations to structures as the cart before the horse. Structures set the conditions for us, but they do not determine what we will do and the meaning of our various projects in life. This is so by many of us doing different things and creating new forms of meaning in structurally similar, if not the same, circumstances. The human world is, in other words, *lived*, and it is creatively so. Appeals to individual natures won’t help in such cases since the observer would need prior cases to establish *this* instance as part of a series that constitutes a nature [italics in the original].\(^\text{20}\)

One logical consequence of Gordon’s observation is that there cannot be a single kind of ontological Jewishness. A metaphysically Jewish property, understood “as part of a *series* that constitutes a nature,” can appear in a variety of guises.\(^\text{21}\) It need not be part of a technically defined category of “Jews,” nor does the category, even if posited and defined, need to be technical. Miriam Peskowitz states the matter in the following way.

In early rabbinic law, the definition of men’s relation to the ownership and control of property is stable. A nearly unassailable part of masculinity was the legal right and social


\(^{21}\) One way to study the *imagination* of gender in conjunction with African American Jewry is by critically analyzing the relationship between slavery and the establishment of Jewish families via marriage. It seems that one can perform the relevant teleological suspensions of disciplinarity in order to ascertain how neocolonial imaginings of the past have permitted members of various Jewish communities to insert (and often assimilate) racist and sexist discourses into modern Jewish sociality. As it says in Gittin 1:4, “All the same are writs of divorce for women and writs of emancipation for slaves...” See Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 467. It is telling that this particularly powerful approach to understanding the relationship between human trafficking and the emergence of various global Hebrew populations has been largely ignored in Jewish cultural studies of recent years.
potential to own property. For women, the legal capacity to own and control property was variable. Early rabbinic ideas about womanhood did not include the idea that property ownership and control was a necessary element of female being [italics mine].

Ontological femaleness was thus a sufficient but not necessary condition for the establishment of Jewish property. On the contrary, the rightful control of property was a necessary condition for the establishment of the ontologically Jewish male. It seems, therefore, that assertions of ontological Jewishness can take advantage of the socially permeable boundaries between those inside and those outside the purview of acceptable Jewish identities, just as it can reveal itself in attempts to evade the situated histories of Jews and their kinfolk. Ontological Jewishness can emerge in the form of embracing some aspects of Jewish historical situations but not others, as though only certain kinds of

22 Miriam Peskowitz, Spinning Fantasies: Rabbis, Gender, and History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 35.

23 Ibid. In this framework, women (like slaves) are kinyan or property as such. Although rabbinic law makes distinctions between various kinds of properties, it is important to remember what impact ontological distinctions can have on scholarship when the assumption of a human existence—that is, the basis on which scholars attribute metaphysically Jewish properties/presences in the first place—is, as a matter of historic fact, denied. Peskowitz’ point, in part, is that such a situation applies to women inasmuch as the research conducted denies their full humanity. I am suggesting the same principle should apply to Jewish studies research conducted in cooperation with conquered and trafficked populations.

24 One can posit Being to a definitive object over which one has no control, not even that of definition. Awareness of technical definitions, therefore, need not be a part of one’s affirmation of ontological Jewishness. By “acceptable” I mean normative or culturally dominant understandings of Jewishness. See Lewis R. Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism (Amherst, NY: Humanity, 1999), 17.
characteristics are “really” those that distinguish Jewish situations from others.\textsuperscript{25} Ontological Jewishness can therefore hide in its own situatedness. It can, for instance, remain hidden in claims of Jewish “diversity” and Jewish “multiculturalism” while simultaneously privileging a very limited set of Jewish expressions as authentic and intentionally marginalizing those expressions of Jewish humanity not conforming to this set. In addition, ontological Jewishness can mask itself. It can perform. It can don a mask of its choosing and perform being hermeneutical, cultural, queer, feminist and even postmodern all while nonetheless distancing itself from the humanistic and historical effects of these performances.\textsuperscript{26} In response to the ontologists of Jewry who choose to hide or mask their forms of ontological Jewishness, other ontologists attempt to isolate a singular quality, a charge, a task or a characteristic that they deem is the “real” Jewish essence, an essence that transcends the human condition as freedom.\textsuperscript{27} Because of the conceptual power wielded by this form or essence, believers in ontological Jewishness can appear as though they are sincere in their ontologized beliefs.\textsuperscript{28} And this sincerity can be dangerous, because as sincere, the ontologists of Jewry may in bad faith pose as people whose ideas should be interpreted as innocent, well-intentioned, or worse,

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid: “In bad faith I may assert that what I ‘really am’ transcends my situation in the world; for example, I ‘am’ my freedom but not my gender or biography.”

\textsuperscript{26} For a good example of how hermeneutic approaches to cultural studies can potentially represent racially problematic forms of black/Jewish and other subaltern performances, see Jane Anna Gordon and Lewis R. Gordon, \textit{Of Divine Warning: Reading Disaster in the Modern Age} (Boulder: Paradigm, 2009), 82-83.

\textsuperscript{27} Gordon, \textit{Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism}, 17.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 17.
completely ignorant of any ethical demands our humanity places upon our own epistemological constructions.\textsuperscript{29} Ontological Jewishness can thrive, therefore, through sincere efforts to exclude non-ontological Jewry from its scope. As a consequence, Jewish existence can thereby be sacrificed in order to exalt the preeminence of a naturalized Jewish being: the Real Jew.\textsuperscript{30} And because from the perspective of the present study, an assault upon Jewish existence—even if conducted by Jews themselves—immediately brings to the fore concerns about Jewish humanity, it should be established that all such attitudes premised on ontological Jewishness necessarily involve subjecting the existence of Jewish humanity to its objectification in the form of a reified substance.\textsuperscript{31}

Having articulated my concerns about both epistemological colonialism and ontological Jewishness, I now want to pose to the reader an alternative understanding of

\textsuperscript{29} This particular interpretation of sincerity is mine; however, the roots of this depiction can easily be located in the writings of others. See Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism, 17; Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, trans. by Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square, 1992), 96-112. In these pages, Sartre famously depicts the posture of sincerity as a manifestation of bad faith. Also see John L. Jackson, Jr., Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005), 14-18, esp. p18. Jackson distinguishes between authenticity and sincerity, the latter of which he portrays as fundamentally intersubjective. Sincerity, according to him, “privileges intent—an interiorized intent… [in which] one still does not see into the other, one still does not know if one can trust the other’s performances,” although this intention and ignorance also recognizes “a mutual granting of autonomy and interiorized validity” between subjects.

\textsuperscript{30} Gordon, Bad Faith and Antilblack Racism, 17: “In bad faith I may assert that what I ‘really am’ transcends my situation in the world…”; Jackson, Real Black, 17, 27-33, esp. 30: “According to a group of Black Hebrew Israelites in Crown Heights and Harlem, what constitutes ‘real Jews’ is also seriously unwieldy—and even up for grabs.”

\textsuperscript{31} Gordon, Bad Faith and Antilblack Racism, 17: “All of these cases are cases of my choosing to take refuge in a notion of myself as a reified substance.”
Jewish existence, an understanding that not only opens up new avenues for studying Africana Jewish Diasporas but one that does so while suspending pre-established commitments to the reified substances of ontological Jewishness. This approach emerges out of the lived experiences of Jews whose histories, as manifestations of Jewish humanity, have been denied or distorted in culturally dominant forms of scholarship. So through a carefully organized set of philosophical reflections, I will aim to answer the following question in this dissertation: What relevance does the history of Africana “Jews,” “Hebrews,” “Israelites,” and their kinfolk in the Americas have to the expansion of knowledge in the Jewish and humanistic sciences?³² My thesis is straightforward:

*Presumptively ontological human natures, including ontological Jewishness, cannot function axiomatically for historical and cultural research on Africana Jewry/Judaism, if such research is conceived as a species of the humanistic sciences. A humanistic science of Africana Jews and their kinfolk must foreground the lived situational contexts and/or lived social worlds that permit such Jews and their kinfolk to appear as ordinary expressions of humanity.*

³² The terms, “Jews,” “Hebrews,” “Israelites,” and “their kinfolk” refers to Hebrew-oriented diasporas in general and should not be understood to imply that any certain group of people (i.e.-Rabbinites, Karaites, etc.) fulfill the essential properties necessary for ideal Jewishness, Hebrewness, etc. moreso than others. The author recognizes that there are senses in which all people may be interpreted as Hebrew-oriented. But it should be emphasized that many of the present dissertation’s sources endorse more limited modern understandings of “Jewish,” “Hebrew,” etc. as primarily referring to populations tracing their ancestry to Hebrew enslavement in ancient Egypt. Our analysis will demonstrate why certain historical situations demand an expansion of this genealogical account to potentially include many populations *not* deemed by themselves or others to be descendants of mythic Hebrew progenitors in antiquity.
It should be immediately emphasized that the lived sociality of ordinary humanity does not always emerge from a thick description of fluid historical moments.\textsuperscript{33} Phenomenologically speaking, permitting ordinary humanity to appear is not the same as articulating the layered coalescence of religious, cultural, social and political contexts.\textsuperscript{34} So my goal here will not involve making unnecessary appeals to the value of quantifying facts over the domain of background information.\textsuperscript{35} This is a move that tends to raise

\textsuperscript{33} Clifford Geertz, \textit{The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays} (New York: Basic, 1973), 19-20. This is the case not only because the ethnographer’s interpretation is different from what objectively occurred in history, but also because thick description itself has “social discourse” as its \textit{telos}. However in the dehumanizing aspects of colonialism, the “social” is precisely what has been destroyed. See Lewis Gordon, \textit{Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and the Human Sciences} (New York: Routledge, 1995), 41-42.

\textsuperscript{34} Geertz, \textit{The Interpretation of Cultures}, 27. For Geertz, this difficulty arises in a relative distinction and/or tension between inscription and specification or “thick description” and “diagnosis.”

\textsuperscript{35} Geertz’s point may be seen in attempts to assimilate subalternity into other kinds of social existences. See Gordon, \textit{Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism}, 5-6: I interpret Gordon’s reference to a \textit{mode} of ontology as a suggestion that modal analyses of values are possible through the investigation of actual decisions. The inscription of numerous background details, therefore, can potentially distort one’s understanding of the meaningfulness of the human phenomenon being studied, particularly if those details are presumed \textit{a priori} to be equally-valued instances of data. Opposed to this is the notion that some data are trivial while other data are more meaningful to the parties involved. (I draw a Jaspersian-inspired distinction between meaning and meaningfulness. See Karl Jaspers, \textit{Truth and Symbol}, trans. By Jean T. Wilde, William Kluback and William Kimmel. New Haven: College and University Press, 1959.) For this reason, when subalternity is one’s primitive modality, it appears that unrestricted domain quantification (or unparsimoniously expanding the number of instances of a kind of phenomenon, such as a complementary fact or instantial datum) does \textit{not} seem to imply either serviceability or philosophical relevance. In short, humanity can appear in texts with very limited descriptions of individual cases. For a prominent alternative view, consider David Lewis’ reflections on modal opinions and linguistic ersatzism in his \textit{On the Plurality of Worlds} (Malden: Blackwell, 1986), 3-5, 19-20, 143-144n5, 156 and his \textit{Counterfactuals} (Malden: Blackwell, 1973), 86-88. Lewis laments what he insists is a common misunderstanding of his possibilist thesis. Lewis, \textit{Counterfactuals}, 86: “But of course
authenticity questions with respect to hyphenated identities, as opposed to forthrightly addressing the more fundamental problem of achieving a humanistic science of actually embodied freedoms. As I will demonstrate, there are eidetic structures of ontological unactualized possible worlds and their unactualized inhabitants do not actually exist... It does not follow that realism about possible worlds is false.” Ibid., 86, 87: He goes on to say: “My realism about possible worlds is merely quantitatively, not qualitatively, unparsimonious.” But in response to Lewis, one could ask the following: How is keeping down the number of “fundamentally different kinds of entity” not an act of the imagination that fulfills the criteria of “realism about unactualized possibles”? Even Lewis’ possibilia, it seems, is more than simply an unrestricted existential quantification. Gordon’s insight appears to be that subaltern fact/value relations as revealed through choices (i.e. “who the human being may be”) cannot be understood apart from a qualitatively unparsimonious hermeneutical stance. Lewis’ contention that the link between possibilia and imagination makes them a sort of Geertzian social discourse is problematic in this instance. Ibid., 88. It simply is not the case that “I could tell you all you wish to hear simply by carrying on my imaginative creation.” The imaginative properties of symbols make such an assertion suspect, even in the context of social contract or agreement.

36 Ibid., 86-87. Ordinariness (or “normalness” according to Geertz—see quote at end of present footnote) is not the same as ritualized responses to stimuli. Traditions can inhibit ordinary human behavior as much as they can reveal it. For example, the social sciences can paint an adequate portrait of how people will tend to behave, given a predetermined set of historical options. A humanistic science of actually embodied freedoms, however, is (literally) a different matter altogether, and I wonder whether or not disciplines such as sociology and anthropology have already given themselves over to ideal representations of a human nature in much of the research that might challenge a human species-centric approach to their research. For a good example of the latter, see Myra J. Hird, Sex, gender and Science (Houndmills: Plaggrave Macmillan, 2004). Given David Lewis’ concerns with actuality, my statement about a science of “actually embodied freedoms” may appear suspect. But for the same reasons as mentioned in n31, without an appreciation of the qualitative dimensions of value as revealed in a situation characterized by Geertz’s “social discourse,” attempts to saturate existence with hyphenated identities can distort as much as reveal human phenomena. For instance, the labels “Black Jews,” “African American Jews” and “Africana Jews” all have political subtexts for those who hear them. An adequate humanistic science of their real appearances, however, should take the perspectives of those who represent these realities as both ordinary and informative. In this respect, and perhaps due to the influence of Alfred Schutz’s works on each, Gordon’s and Geertz’s approaches converge on this point. See Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays, 9, 14, 15, 19: “Understanding a people’s culture exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity (italics mine).”
humanity that, regardless of the amount or number of textual traditions informing one’s metaphysical grammar, militate against the phenomenological appearance of free human expression. Pointing out these structures as they are found in the methods informing the study of African American Jews will remain a critical practice throughout this dissertation in order to establish the truth-value of the thesis as articulated here.

Although this thesis can be used to inform the study of numerous cultures that have, through colonialism, engendered their own subaltern populations, it most fundamentally emerges out of a concern for addressing the implications of the two hypotheses mentioned earlier, hypotheses that, over time, have yet to cease propelling my interest in this topic.

**Literature Review**

In this review of literature, I have chosen to survey a small representative sample of the scholarship, particularly focusing on works that have guided dominant perceptions in the field. There are sociological, anthropological, theological, historical and a variety of other kinds of methods to be found in the research on African American Jews. In terms of disciplinary approaches, therefore, the literature is quite diverse. Despite this diversity, however, ontological Jewishness has steadfastly remained a fundamental aspect of the research on African American Jews, Hebrews, Israelites and their kinfolk from the early 20th century onward into the present.

I begin with the classic text, *The Black Jews of Harlem*, Howard Brotz’s decades-long research project that culminated in a complete and published sociological study of a
congregation of Harlem’s Jews. Brotz’s primary method in *The Black Jews of Harlem* was a form of participant observation, and for this reason, he spent many years visiting a Jewish congregation located in Harlem. He interviewed members of the congregation, analyzed its literature, researched the documented aspects of its history and befriended the congregation’s leader, Rabbi Wentworth A. Matthews. He stated in *The Black Jews of Harlem* that his research was undertaken in order to discover what compelled “Negroes” to dispense with racial significations of the dominant society and assert what, to him, constituted alternative and non-traditional identities for blacks. Brotz’s book was unique for its time, because it implicitly questioned the group solidarity and ancestral thinking undergirding definitions of Jewishness and Negroness as two distinct identities. The presence of black Jews in Harlem contested that neat distinction, and Brotz sought out an explanation for why this was the case. By compiling his research on the worship and language of the congregants, as well as his many conversations with Rabbi Matthews, he eventually concluded that African American Jews actually embraced a religious form of black nationalist resistance, premised not on a political program, but rather on asserting collective self-respect for Negroes. This is not to say that Brotz


39 Ibid., vi-vii, 126-127. Brotz did not think black Jews were ordinary Jews. He argues that the emergence of black Jews and black Muslims can be attributed to a “doctrinaire nationalism” that was convinced that whites were morally incapable of behaving justly towards black people. But according to Brotz, the nationalist sentiment was anti-white, militant, bitter, sectarian, resentful and counterracist. Ibid., 125-126. Because the black nationalist movements exhibited these traits, their political aims could be understood as an entirely counterproductive “anti-assimilationism which repudiates hope for real civic
believed African American Judaism to be completely apolitical. He simply thought that its politics was based on a desire for dignity and self-respect among blacks.  

In addition, Brotz also believed that the black Jews’ religious practices should not have been understood as a traditional or legitimate form of Judaism at all. In his opinion,

It must be recalled that no matter how they may view the service the phenomenon of Negroes wanting to be Jews cannot help but make some appeal to Jewish solidarity. Of course, any number of writers have attacked the sect as outright frauds; but to look at them in this way seems to me mistakenly to pull them much further into the Jewish world than they really are and loses sight of the racial meaning of their beliefs.

An important element of Brotz’s analysis is revealed in his commentary here. The basis on which Brotz drew a sharp distinction between the African American Jews he studied and what he termed “the Jewish world” rested upon “the racial meaning of [the black Jews’] beliefs.” In other words, it was the willingness and ability of black Jews to use a particular kind of race discourse that made it difficult for him to include black Jews into his own understanding of the Jewish world. His resistance to including these discourses

equality and, hence, any rational political preoccupation with this goal.” Ibid., 117, 126. In addition, Brotz insists that the nationalist movements supported their programs by inventing new identities, such as black Jews and/or black Muslims. In Brotz’ words, “Finally, to the fact that the Negro does not have a culture of his own, they [black Jews and other black nationalists] have sensed the disadvantage to which this puts the Negro. But then their response is to invent a culture proclaiming a fictitious identity” (italics mine).

40 Ibid., vi-vii, 97-99, 126, 131-132.

41 Ibid., 51-52.

42 Ibid., 52-53, 56-57.
(and therefore black human beings) in the Jewish world is telling. Brotz conflated blackness with “racial meaning” in such a way as to imply that Jews of European heritage do not have any similar or equivalent “racial meaning of their beliefs.” Thus it was not the racial meanings as such that Brotz found problematic for including the black Jews “into the Jewish world.” It was rather the black Jews’ invocation of their blackness that Brotz found troublesome. This suggests that Brotz’s Jewish world was characterized by white normativity. Whiteness was for him an ontological property that signified

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43 Ibid., 51-52: “In general there has never been any racial barrier raised by the Jewish community...” (italics mine)

44 Ibid., 52, 56-57: “In general there has never been any racial barrier raised by the Jewish community to any Negro who wished to convert to Judaism” (italics mine). The implication here seems to be that the Jewish community is a racially non-black one. “My own rapport with the sect,” writes Brotz, “did not really develop until I realized that they were far more interested in outrages committed against Negroes that in any events within the Jewish world.” In Brotz’s account, the Negroes and the Jews were two entirely separate peoples. “From their strict ideological position, they would assert that the true Jews are black and the white Jews are frauds, ‘the product of intermarriage’” (italics mine). “Their reluctance to face the Jewish world with complete candor in these respects has been the cause of all the misunderstanding about the sect and between the sect and the Jewish world.” I contend that Brotz’s statements here are not very comprehensible unless the reader endorses his racially ontological assertion that Jews are not black people.

45 Ibid., 53. Again, Brotz appears to be implying white (Jewish) normativity in the following statements: “One [Negro] family actually joined the Institutional Synagogue when it was still functioning in Harlem thirty years ago. But this is the only instance of this sort, at least in New York, that has come to my attention... Although they cannot simply be bracketed together with other historical exotic Jewish groups, there is an extraordinary openness, particularly on the part of Matthew, to relationships with Jews, and, with all the perplexities of their beliefs, a desire to be a Jew that Jews might wish to take into account, provided one is prepared to blur certain questions” (italics mine). Also see Ibid., 56: “From their strict ideological position, they would assert that the true Jews are black and the white Jews are frauds, “the product of intermarriage”” (italics mine).
Jewishness, and affirmations of blackness, coupled with Jewishness, implied negations of Jewishness.  

These moves can be understood upon noticing that Brotz actually wrote *The Black Jews of Harlem* with a variety of dilemmas in mind, all of which he believed was related to “the Negro problem” and all of which he was attempting to account for in terms of what would constitute progress on America’s race problem. He concluded that the solution to the Negro problem would be achieved through assimilation, which he described as a “radical sense of biological absorption.” He insisted that “if Negroes

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46 Ibid., v, 46, 47, 49-50. Consider chapter three of Brotz’s text, titled “The Black Jews and Their *Fairer* Brethren” (italics mine), in which he makes the following remark: “For a Negro to tell a Jew that he too is really a Jew puts him in a position where no matter how fantastic his claim may seem he is taken seriously and wondered at. The natural response of a Jew is to try to figure out how they became Jews in the first place” (italics mine). It is interesting that Brotz constructs a natural (read: ontological) understanding of Jewish behavior and then imposes that naturalized behavior onto any person who attempts to figure out where Black Jews came from. The result is that the culturally particular aspects of African American Jewry must be understood as a manifestation of pathos and mimicry. “The net result of all this,” writes Brotz, “given this erratic way of acquiring a new religion, is what amazingly looks at first sight to a visitor like a Jewish service. And given the complexity of traditional Judaism, this in itself is something of a feat. But of course Talmudic Judaism not only rests on a core of learning but is also a way of life which even on the level of an unlearned person has to be lived in to be known. The myriad of traditional details which, for example, an ordinary Jewish housewife would know, constitute a world the Black Jews hardly penetrate or could be expected to penetrate… But whatever the appearance of the worship may be upon first sight, upon prolonged observation the syncretistic character of the religion becomes evident.” Ignoring the assumption about the relationship between “an ordinary Jewish housewife” and the knowledge of Jewish religion, the reference to syncretism here appears to be functioning as a code for white cultural purity, if not in word, then in deed.

47 Ibid., 71-72. Although Brotz does not specify precisely what he means by the “Negro Problem,” he does indicate that the Negro Problem is related to the political platforms of assimilation and/or protest found in the rhetoric of black leaders.

48 Ibid., 121-122.
could be absorbed, that is, if there were no Negroes, there would be no Negro problem.”

What’s interesting here are the contours of identity Brotz presumed to be attendant upon the signification of human beings as “Negroes,” contours he holds in contradistinction to that of human beings he understood as “Jews.” In the preface to the 1970 edition of The Black Jews of Harlem, he wrote

This book is about a religious group whose members claim to be Jews but who, at the same time, do not deny an ethnic or racial affiliation to another group whom they regard as so-called Negroes. As such their experience is bound to have implications both for the Jewish world and for the black, Negro, or so-called Negro world which are different and unrelated [italics mine] to each other.

As we have seen, a premise of ontological formulations of humanity is that difference(s) “admit no possibility of transcendence or mediation.” Victor Anderson states it the following way:

Whether one accents the negative or positive qualities of racial polarization (negation or mirroring), the representational intentions of these binary dialectics remain untranscended. The dialectical structure of ontological blackness provides a unity of representational intentions in cultural studies.

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49 Ibid., 121. The connections between the Negro Problem and the Jewish Problem should be apparent here.

50 Ibid., v.

51 Anderson, Beyond Ontological Blackness, 14.

52 Ibid., 14.
Anderson’s point here is that any “cultural studies” approach to human phenomena that does not transcend ontological versions of human presence will be unable to account for instances when humanity itself transcends those metaphysical ontologies. In Brotz’ case, his assumed understandings of Jewishness and Negroness were challenged by black Jews, and he sought to explain why this appeared to be the case. (That blacks could be mundanely and/or ordinarily Jewish was something he summarily dismissed.)\(^53\) As a result of this dilemma, Brotz needed to find an explanation for the appearance of African American Jewish presence. The mere existence of black Jews alone called out for some kind of cultural or historical justification.\(^54\)

Eventually Brotz was able to find his answer in a twofold process of both religious and political re-identification. Consider the following conclusion he penned in one of his earlier studies on the group:

Black Jews may be accurately regarded as sects of Christians who pressed their identification with the figures of the Old Testament to the extreme belief that they themselves are Jews.\(^55\)

In this passage, Brotz identified “black Jews” as “Christians,” and he justified this assertion on the basis of group, symbolic-identity formations arising out of the English


Protestant church.\textsuperscript{56} I will refer to this explanation as the “allegory thesis” of black Jewish origins. The thesis rests on two propositions: (1) the existence of early black Christian identification with the stories of Hebrew enslavement and exile contained within the Christian scriptures, and (2) the power of such religious identifications to play formative roles in the construction of personal and collective identities among black Americans. The allegory hypothesis has enjoyed a sustained acceptance both in the media and scholarly writings. Although according to Brotz it provided an explanation for the African and Judaic syncretisms characteristic of black Jewish congregations, it did not address a series of lingering questions.\textsuperscript{57}

Perhaps noting Brotz’s inability to provide a satisfactory explanation for why Black “Christians” would shun theological affiliations with Christianity, in her book \textit{The Negroes and the Jews}, Lenora Berson insisted the following:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{57} Brotz, \textit{The Black Jews of Harlem}, 50-51. Indeed, all communities apparently embrace multiple group identities. They embody the conflation of various group histories and endorse a multifaceted narrative that transgresses formerly accepted margins of cultural differentiation. Such are ordinary characteristics of cultural development, and one would be hard-pressed to find exceptions to these behaviors amongst any given group of human beings. However, Brotz seemed willing to ignore these rather banal dimensions of cultural and ethnic formation. In the case of black Jews, an exceptional explanation was required. According to him, “Black Jews” were not (even religiously speaking) “Jews.” They were “Christians” who convinced themselves otherwise. Yet Brotz did not provide his readers with his criteria for determining Christian identity. Left with the assumption that conventional understandings of Christian affiliation would suffice, Brotz chose Protestantism. For his thesis in this respect, see Brotz, \textit{The Black Jews of Harlem}, 5, 7, 9. He eventually argues that no group calling themselves “Black Jews” appears before 1915. Readers, however, may be provoked to ask why a group of Christians would have refused to accept any formal theological affiliation with Christianity? Brotz did not address this question. He stated that black Jews believed they were Jews. His analysis, however, did not provide a credible reason for why entire communities of African Americans would believe themselves to be Jews when they are not.
\end{quote}
Black Jewish congregations are made up of Caribbean Island Negroes who are descendants of miscegenous marriages between Sephardic Jews and blacks, descendants of slaves on Jewish-owned Southern plantations, leftovers from the Back to African movement of the 1920’s, and recent converts…

Their rituals range from impressionistic versions of Jewish ceremonials to exact replicas. Their existence is testimony to the desperate desire of American Negroes to find an acceptable self-image.  

According to this explanation, although many people in these groups were descended (both biologically and religiously) from black-Jewish unions in slavery, their rituals were not really Jewish. They were instead “impressionistic versions” and in some cases, “exact replicas.” And the performance of these duplicates of Jewish ritual bore witness to a “desperate desire of American Negroes to find an acceptable self-image.”

There is an interesting relationship to found here between assertions of ontological Jewishness such as that found in Brotz’s work and the emergence of justification narratives such as that found in Berson’s text. The justification narratives attempt to address what may be considered clear historical exceptions to the primary metaphysical grammar at work. If such a grammar says that it’s normal for Jews to be white, then black Jews bring the sufficiency of the grammar into question. In order for ontological humanities to formulate Jewishness as a species of whiteness, upon the emergence of blacks that are exempt to this formulation, the metaphysical grammar could respond by demanding the emergence of teleological justifications, usually in the form of

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origin narratives, for those black identities. It is no accident, for example, that Berson’s justification for black Jewish existence emerged in a volume dedicated to the study of “Blacks” and “Jews,” a rather prominent topic of American academic interest in the latter 20th century. Although her stated purpose in exploring the topic was to highlight the

59 Brotz’s ontology is crucial for this point. Remember, in The Black Jews of Harlem, 47, Brotz insisted that “The natural response of a Jew is to try to figure out how [Negroes] became Jews in the first place” (italics mine). The emergence of these origin narratives for Jews of color, or what I call here “teleological justifications for black Jewish existence,” is a theme that appears quite prominently in the research. The following are a few examples: Hans A. Baer and Merril Singer, African American Religion: Varieties of Protest and Accomodation, 2nd ed. (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee, 2002), 115: “The earliest sects to express some form of black Judaism antedate the twentieth century” (italics mine). In a section titled, “The Development of African American Judaism,” Baer and Singer go on to trace the origins of black Judaic groups in the late 19th century (pages 115-120). Eric J. Sundquist, Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2005), 115-116: “The oldest known sect of Black Jews… emerged out of a tradition of millenial Protestantism in which the restoration of the Jews to Palestine was seen as a prelude to the return of Jesus Christ” (italics mine). Hasia Diner, In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915-1935 (Westport: Greenwood, 1977), 69: “Occasionally [in the 1920’s], reporters from the Yiddish dailies went to one of the Negro temples and expressed surprise at the strict adherence to Sabbath and dietary law, at the liturgical purity maintained, and speculated on the origins of the groups” (italics mine). Israel J. Gerber, The Heritage Seekers: American Blacks in Search of Jewish Identity (Middle Village: Jonathan David, 1977) 64: “Where there is doubt that a subject is Jewish, as in this instance [with the Black Hebrews], the individual’s history and that of his immediate ancestors is investigated until a point of Jewish origin is established” (italics mine). There are many other examples, but the point would be redundant. It should suffice to say that the literature is replete with instances of researchers attempting, in one way or another, to document the origins of African American Jews and/or black Jews as such.

60 Consider the following titles: Robert Philipson, The Identity Question: Blacks and Jews in Europe and America (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000); Adam Zachary Newton, Facing Black and Jew: Literature as Public Space in Twentieth-Century America (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999); Emily Miller Budick, Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1998); Jack Salzman and Cornel West, eds., Struggles in the Promised Land: Toward a History of Black-Jewish Relations in the United States (New York: Oxford University, 1997); Michael Lerner and Cornel West, Jews & Blacks: Let the Healing Begin (New York: Grosset/Putnam, 1995), and not to mention some of the recent classics mentioned
tensions and convergences experienced and articulated by both peoples, her articulation of these peoples’ relationship was conditioned by ontological norms of identity construction. For this reason, black Jews, the people who were the de facto embodiments of her research concerns, not only emerged as exceptional identities whose existence needed justification, but also as derivative humanities whose presence constituted evidence of black people’s imitation of white people’s behavior. In short,


Berson, The Negroes and The Jews, 210-213. It is clear in these pages and others that for Berson, the default understanding of “Jews” is that of a white identity. The tone of her writing clearly expresses sympathy for black Jews, but she uses references to “Jews” and “white Jews” interchangeably, although never doing this in her references to black Jews. Perhaps this tendency is there because she identifies the numerically larger Jewish community as a white one. Ibid., 212: “In North Philadelphia many of the white landlords, shopkeepers, pawnbrokers and constables were Jews, as were many of the white teachers, doctors and social workers. Most Negroes resented the Jews, whom they believed alternately repressed them and offered them charity.” Ibid., 207: “Yet there are ten thousand Negroes in the United States who claim a Jewish religious identity. What is it these Negroes seek from Jewishness” (italics mine)? See Brotz, The Black Jews of Harlem, 47. What’s interesting about many of the titles in the previous footnote is that although they contain a great deal of material about Blacks and Jews, they tend to have a paucity of information about black Jews that does not somehow exoticize them. A number of the studies, for example, like the Berson excerpt here, use teleological justifications for black Jewish existence as the basis on which to include material on African American Jewry at all, and in this respect, they seem to have followed the recommendations of Brotz on what the ordinary orientation towards Africana Jewish groups should be. According to him, “the natural response,” at least for a real Jew, is to search for and provide for oneself an account of black Jewish origins. (Note how in this explanation, it is assumed that there is no need to search for the origins of European-derived Jews.)

This theme, what I call the “mimicry motif,” can also be found throughout the literature. It involves the notion that black Jews are derivations, imitations and/or somehow modeled on white Jews. Consider the following instances: Berson, The Negroes and The Jews, 207-208: “What is it these negroes seek from Jewishness? The best answer would seem to be some positive affirmation of their existence and the illusion of power. Such an illusion is fostered by the Jewish stereotype. Before Negroes
phenotypically European Jews could be mundanely Jewish, whereas phenotypically African Jews could not. For Berson, the different historical narratives as evidenced by Euro-Jews’ and Afro-Jews’ different racial locations proved too great to not affect the representation of African American Jews as ordinary manifestations of Jewish humanity.63 Although the rationale for insisting upon the black Jews’ difference from ever came into contact with real Jews, the black masses identified with the Hebrews of the Old Testament… After emancipation, Negro leaders became obsessed with the Jewish model” (italics mine). Baer and Singer, African American Religion, 115: “The propinquity established between African Americans and immigrant Jews in northern cities also [quoting Deane Shapiro] ‘gave both potential and practicing Black Jews an unusual opportunity to learn Jewish traditions firsthand’” (italics mine). Lerner and West, Blacks and Jews, 98: “West: That Black/Judaic movement had a significant impact on Black group thinking. It was nationalist thinking, but it used a Jewish model for organizing Black people, with their own Temple, their own rabbis, and so forth… Lerner: They self-consciously modeled themselves on Jews” (italics mine)? Brotz, The Black Jews of Harlem, 8: “The second such stimulus [of the belief that the Negroes are really Jews] was provided by Booker T. Washington’s opinions, current around the turn of the century, that Negroes would be well advised to model themselves upon Jews in a number of respects but particularly with regard to the inward pride possessed by the Jewish people throughout history” (italics mine). Berger, Black Jews in America, 1: “The Jews, as a group, suffering from ‘prejudice and persecution’ impressed Negro leaders, who saw Jews as models for their own strenuous efforts to achieve self-improvement” (italics mine). Gerber, The Heritage Seekers, 188: “From high esteem… the blacks began to imitate him [the modern Jew] and to identify with him” (italics mine). Edward S. Shapiro, We Are Many: Reflections on American Jewish History and Identity (Syracuse: Syracuse University, 2005), 242: “It is true that in a variety of ways ever since the time of slavery, blacks have drawn on the Jewish experience… Black nationalists used the Zionist movement as a model for their own back-to-Africa movement. Finally, blacks pointed to the example of the upward social and economic mobility and bourgeoisie values of Jews as a model for their own people. For groups such as the Black Jews of Harlem, this admiration for Jews led to syncretistic religious cults containing Jewish elements” (italics mine). These accounts, once again, do not exhaust the examples in the literature. However, the theme of black Jews modeling themselves on or imitating white Jews is quite prominent.

63 Berson, The Negroes and The Jews, 207-208, 210: I say this on the basis of Berson’s appeal to the notion that blacks sought “some positive affirmation of their existence” and “an acceptable self-image” from Jewishness.
ordinary Jews may have varied from author to author, numerous studies have made similar appeals as that found in *The Negroes and the Jews* and justified the existence of Jews of color by assuming it is a mimetic derivation (or in Berson’s words, “impressionistic version”) from Euro-Jewish existence.\(^6^4\)

Although Berson advocated the notion that black Jews of biological descent from pre-abolition miscegenation were “versions” of white Jewry, she was not the one to most clearly formulate the thesis that blacks who call themselves Jews do so by replicating and mimicking white (read: “really Jewish”) Jews. Rabbi Israel Gerber, who advanced the “Black Hebrew Identification” thesis, was the most articulate proponent of the notion that blacks were mimicking white Jews.\(^6^5\) In many respects, the identification thesis repeated similar themes of the allegory thesis, including the presumptively “Christian” origins of blacks. However, Gerber would elaborate and expand the allegory thesis by adding a new element to it in his interpretation of black Jewish existence. The argument, found in

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\(^6^4\) In addition to those mentioned in footnote 58, an interesting example of the mimicry motif can be found in the work of Jonathan Schorsch, *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004), 229-230. When reviewing the work of J. D. Oppenheim on the people of Surinam, Schorsch came upon evidence of spiritual attitudes that clearly bore some relation to rabbinic Judaism but according to Schorsch, could not be considered a “believing” Judaism at all: “Many colored people of Paramaribo, continued Oppenheim, held the *mezuza* fixed by Jews on their doorposts in ‘high esteem’ as a kind of protective charm. *Mezuzot* could thus be found affixed in the correct place on the homes of non-Whites, but empty of the parchment with biblical passages required by Jewish law… *These syncretistic uses of the mezuza and other ritual objects or rites taken from Jews show, however, that we have left the realm of a believing practice of Judaism for even more nebulous regions of affinity, empathy, and mimicry*” (italics mine).

his book, *The Heritage Seekers: American Blacks in Search of Identity*, can be summed up as follows:

1. During slavery, African Americans had no confidence in their basic abilities as persons.66
2. After Emancipation, African Americans needed to develop a sense of selfhood.67
3. The search for selfhood produced an identity crisis in African Americans, who abhorred their Blackness and yearned to become one with and belong to White folks.68
4. *In conscious deception*, Blacks began to imitate modern Jews, falsely calling themselves “Israelites” and adopting a social and cultural structure that would furnish them with feelings of dignity and worth.69


67 Ibid., 182-183.

68 Ibid., 186.

69 Ibid., 188-189, 176-197. The author has been criticized for this particular summary of Gerber’s work. However, the present depiction of Gerber’s thesis is actually quite generous. The reader is advised to read chapter ten of Gerber’s book, titled “Black Hebrew Identification,” in its entirety and critically examine its assumptions in order to identify the many interesting descriptions of African American people he includes. Ibid., 179, 180, 182, 183, 186, 189: Among them are notions that blacks believed they had no past; that blacks had no access to developed culture; that marriage was non-existent for black slaves; that only a few blacks fought for Emancipation; that their lives were “too animal-like” to feel pride; that Emancipation actually *inhibited* black freedom and agency; that blacks themselves hated being black; that by becoming Jews they elevated their status; and more.
There are several questions that may be provoked by Berson’s and Gerber’s formulation, but I would like to concentrate for a moment on the fourth, concluding aspect of Gerber’s identification thesis. Central to his hypothesis was the idea that in conscious deception, African Americans began to call themselves Jews. In short, his contention that African American Jewish identity “was an attempt at counterfeit self-esteem” was tantamount to saying that African American Jews were lying to themselves and to others.\(^70\) Thus, the labeling of deception had become one aspect of the research claiming to represent American Jews of color. What one may notice, in addition, is how this characterization changed the fundamental theses about the origins of black Jews; no longer could African American “Israelites” be depicted as mentally ill blacks that mimicked white (read: “really Jewish”) Jews.\(^71\) At least a form of racial sincerity could be imagined in the case of the mentally ill. But the identification thesis incorporated the idea that black Jews were consciously deceiving others, and this element of conscious deceit could be used to justify the policing of African American Jews. If not rigorously dismissed, African American Jews’ discourses about Jewish racism could cultivate undesired publicity against Jews of European derivation. For many years, Rabbi Gerber’s analysis would be a standard justification for the Afro-Jews’ existence, and the present author was able to locate few approaches that have specifically and publicly taken issue with his analysis.

Although much of the more recent research on African American Judaism claims to have transcended the original approaches of the early and mid-20\(^{th}\) century studies, an

\(^{70}\) Ibid., 189.

\(^{71}\) Ibid., 186.
examination of their conclusions reveals a large amount of consistency with Brotz’s early works. The influence of his depictions of Jewishness and Negroness over sixty years ago can still be witnessed in twenty-first century writings on African American Jews. For example, it has been nearly ten years since James Landings’ monumental work, *Black Judaism*, was published. Over the course of his career, Landing, perhaps more than any other single researcher, assembled arguably the largest diversity of primary materials on Afro-Judaisms in the United States. He collected many old newspaper clippings, scholarly articles, photographs, personal letters, flyers, propaganda booklets and privately owned footage. He also visited many Afro-Jewish congregations in cities such as Cleveland, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York. His purpose was to approach the topic of black Jews’ history anew and discover if former writers were accurately representing the movement. His book, the most comprehensive account of the 20th century history of African American Judaism to appear in print, concludes that black Jews are neither black nationalists nor messianic nationalists. They are, according to Landing, “Christians” and in this respect, Landing ends up agreeing with Brotz’s early depiction of the black Jews as an essentially black, non-Jewish collection of sects and cults. To illustrate, a striking manifestation of the influence of these sentiments can be found in the opening pages of Landing’s *Black Judaism*. In the following passage, Landing explicates his invention of the difference between black Jews (lower case “b”) and Black Jews (upper case “B”):

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72 Note: Landing’s collection is housed at the university Special Collections at the main library of the University of Illinois at Chicago.
Black Judaism is defined in this work as a form of institutionalized (congregational) religious expression in which Black persons identify themselves as Jews, Israelites, or Hebrews (sometimes as Hebrew-Israelites) in a manner that seems unacceptable to the “Whites” of the world’s Jewish community, primarily because Jews take issue with the various justifications set forth by Black Jews in establishing this identity. Thus, “Black Judaism,” as defined here, stand distinctly apart from “black Judaism,” or that Judaic expression found among Black persons that would be acceptable to the world’s Jewish community, such as conversion or birth to a recognized Jewish mother. “Black Judaism” has been a social movement; “black Judaism” has been an isolated social phenomenon. Thus, “Black Judaism” will be seen to be more emphatically a Black expression than a Jewish one.73

It would be an oversimplification to conclude Landing is only interested in dismissing African American Jewry “because Jews take issue with the various justifications set forth by Black Jews in establishing this identity.” However, based on other elements of his text, he apparently assumes certain religious phenomena exhibited by African Americans may almost categorically be defined as “Christian” in orientation.74 When such “Christian” phenomena are practiced by African American Jews, he consistently draws the conclusion that their presence negates ordinary Jewish identities in the lives of Black Jews. But what Landing neglects to mention in the quote above is that for many people in the North America, a “recognized Jewish mother” connotes a white Jewish mother and that “conversion” to Judaism implies a conversion overseen by white Jews or other Jews


74 Landing, *Black Judaism*, 17-18, 28-30; Landing’s explication of the holiness tradition is filtered through certain theological presuppositions he categorically understands as (ontologically) “Christian.” This observation could give rise to the possibility of developing a philosophical critique of ontological Christianity in the same sense as I have tried to develop a critique of ontological Jewishness here.
of color that are recognized by white Jews. By building on these premises, he has in
effect theorized the Jewish people as two groups—“the world’s Jewish community” and
“Black persons [who] identify themselves as Jews.” These two groups can be understood
as virtually identical to Brotz’s ontological formulations of Jewishness penned decades
before *Black Judaism* was published. Evidence for the persistence of such racial
ontologies is indicated by Landing’s refusal to explore the fact that (b)lack Judaism and
(B)lack Judaism have been quite interrelated and composed of many of the same persons,
groups or families.75

In the beginning of this text, Landing lays out several themes which broadly
identify the focus of his study, as well as his conclusions. He writes that

It is believed that some form of black Judaism has existed
within every black community in which there has been historical
contact with Christians or Jews over the millennia. It has
manifested itself through adoption of certain traditions, customs,
and artifacts; adoption of Hebrew words and phrases, either
through linguistic metaphor or analogy; and through exposure to
the Jewish and Christian scriptures. Missionary activity, deliberate
or otherwise, was probably the most important mechanism,
conversion being less important. There seems to be no lack of
evidence that Jewish tradition and artifacts penetrated black society
through the Nile River valley and along the southern margins of
the Sahara Desert at a very early date. Of greater importance,
however, was the close contact of both blacks and Jews in diaspora
during the slave period of United States history when blacks were
governed by Christian and Jewish slave owners.76

75 This is something Landing suggests as a possibility but does not explore in depth.

76 Ibid., 10.
These words refer to Landing’s belief that there is a black Judaic expression “that would be acceptable to the world’s Jewish community.” But his words betray an assumed difference between the blacks that encountered this Christian and/or Jewish tradition that “penetrated black society” and the blacks that claimed it as their own. His notion of how people may lay claim to a tradition is key for understanding the racial ontologies underlying his descriptions of Jewish, Christian and Black presence. For even those communities that he might describe as a form of “Jewish expression,” he suggests that their narratives are made possible by moving ontologies or what Lewis Gordon calls a “floating category of analysis.” In his description, black Judaism is created by blacks through “adoption,” “exposure,” “Missionary activity,” “conversion,” “contact,” and “close observation” of various aspects of (ontologically) Jewish life. In short, nothing one may readily call “Jewish” is understood by Landing to be indigenous to the continent of Africa. These ontological assumptions lead him to a similar conclusion as Brotz and others in previous years:

Despite the close association with Jews and occasional involvement in Jewish life by blacks, this seems not to have been enough, by itself, to explain the origins of Black Judaism.

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77 Ibid.
79 Landing, Black Judaism, 10.
80 Ibid., 11.
After this statement, Landing begins to trace the origins of “Black Judaism” through a familiar terrain of influences, which since the mid-20th century, have become virtually doctrinaire in the academic research on African American Jews—the important influence of the Holiness movement, post-slavery Protestant Christianity and Pentecostalism. Landing also suggests that his conclusions, even though the adherents of Black Judaism themselves may disagree with them, are consistent with all the available evidence.\(^81\) Although Brotz had mentioned the Holiness, Protestant and Pentecostal influences half-a-century earlier, it is Landing that, after compiling and interpreting all his research, confirms Brotz’s earlier speculations about the “motivations” behind the rise of Black Judaism.\(^82\)

It is important to remember that both Landing and Brotz proceeded inductively in their research by gathering a large, diverse set of materials and reaching conclusions about the people referenced through those materials by inferring connections between their corpus of materials and the ontological assumptions they brought to their research. Although Brotz has been recognized as one of the earliest authorities on black Jews in America, his ideas about the nature of Jewish racial identity played a commanding role in establishing the investigative parameters for studying black Jewish movements well into the 21st century. Not only was “the Jew” understood to be ontologically separate from “the Negro” in this frame of reference, but white Jewish existence was presumed to constitute Jewish existence as such (or at least without need of explanation). On the

\(^81\) Ibid., xi, xiii-xiv.

\(^82\) Ibid., 15n11.
other hand, a hermeneutic of suspicion was called forth when black Jews appeared. Given the role of institutionalized racism in American society, this means that past attempts to account for the racial formations among African American Jews may have entailed a concomitant construction of American Jewishness as a categorically white racial ontology. The importance of this possibility rests in its potential to uncover some of the more pernicious and undesirable consequences of the Jewish and human sciences’ approach to Africana Jewish studies. For instance, Landing’s neo-Brotzian ontology depicts Black Judaism as somewhat deceptive; he describes it as imparting a “veneer of Judaic tradition” (italics mine).  

“Black Judaism,” he states, “is a form of black social protest, as opposed to a form of Jewish expression” (italics mine). Such conclusions reflect the values of ontological assumptions established more than a generation earlier.

Landing’s approach to ontological Jewishness found its roots in the historical research of persons other than Brotz. Most importantly, the conclusions of historian Bertram Korn also undergirded the ideas of Landing. Bertram Wallace Korn was an important rabbi and professor who, during the mid-twentieth century, conducted groundbreaking research on the involvement of Jews in pre-abolition American slavery. The results of his findings were published in his most cited book on the topic, *Jews and Negro Slavery in the Old South: 1789-1865*. It is partially on the basis of Korn’s research that Landing and others agree that Jewish slavery “seems not to have been enough, by

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83 Ibid., 13.

84 Ibid.
itself, to explain the origins of Black Judaism.\textsuperscript{85} For this reason, a brief overview of Korn’s research concerning Jews and slavery is in order.

At the beginning of his book, Korn clarifies the goals of his research as a brief survey of various themes regarding the involvement of Jews in slavery.\textsuperscript{86} During the course of the book, Korn articulates a number of ideas that have remained virtually unquestioned in the study of North American Jewish slavery since he pinned them. Among these are the following conclusions: (1)-A relatively small number of Jews were slave owners.\textsuperscript{87} (2)-Some of those owners were “kindly” in their treatment of slaves.\textsuperscript{88} (3)-Occasionally, Jewish owners would emancipate their slaves.\textsuperscript{89} (4)-Some slave owners were violent in their treatment of slaves.\textsuperscript{90} (5)-Jewish traders seemed more willing to conduct business with blacks.\textsuperscript{91} (6)-Few Jews were major slave traders, and Jews did not constitute a major segment of the overall slave-trading market.\textsuperscript{92} (7)-Occasionally, Jews carried on interracial relationships with blacks. Some of these relationships led to children, but the available records are too few and fragmentary to

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 11.

\textsuperscript{86} Bertram Korn, Jews and Negro Slavery in the Old South 1789-1865 (Elkins Park: Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel, 1961), 12.

\textsuperscript{87} Korn, Jews and Negro Slavery, 13.

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 27, 30.

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 31-32.

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 34, 36.

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 37.

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 45.
make any reliable conclusions regarding them.\textsuperscript{93} (8)-The overall behavior and attitudes of Jews regarding slavery were indistinguishable from that of non-Jewish slave owners.\textsuperscript{94}

Korn’s method included a large survey and examination of hundreds and perhaps thousands of documents produced by Jews during the pre-abolition period. Chief among these documents and perhaps most critical for his arguments were his study of Jewish wills, legal proceedings, newspaper accounts of slaveholding Jewish families, archival records, personal letters, etc. In short, Korn examined a large swath of primary documents and inferred conclusions based on the ontological assumptions from which he began to analyze his subject. Of all his conclusions, perhaps the strongest and most influential has been the eighth. It was, however, the seventh conclusion, and the seventh conclusion alone, that spurred a brief comment by Korn about African American Jews. After implying that “present-day Negroes who regard themselves as Jews” probably had few historical roots in slavery, Korn goes on to mention that he could locate only five documented references to Jewish men’s interracial relationships with black women.\textsuperscript{95}

In the summarizing evaluation of this research, Korn made the argument that slavery as a system functioned much better for Jews than Jews did for slavery.\textsuperscript{96}

According to Korn, although it was true that Jews participated in the enslavement and trafficking of blacks, they did so in large part to increase their own standing in

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 48-49.

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 57, 66.

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 49.

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 68
relationship to other whites. Therefore a conceptual assimilation of Jewishness and whiteness was necessary in order to understand the basic arguments of Jews and Negro Slavery in the Old South. Korn was very clear about this point:

Slavery played an unacknowledged role in this question of Jewish status in the Old South, too. Although Southern society fostered a caste system which also applied to various classes of whites, and which distinguished the store-keeper from the wealthier merchant, the merchant in turn from the professional man, and the attorney and physician from the planter, the all-pervasive division was between the races. The Jews were white, [italics mine] and this very fact goes a long way towards accounting for the measurably higher social and political status achieved by Jews in the South than in the North.  

As indicated by the title of his work, it is difficult to understand Korn’s conclusions without assuming the functional role of some kind of ontologically white Jewishness in his analysis. The quote above reveals that the relevant ontological assumption was racial in content, and although Korn did not ascribe this assumption to the works of Howard Brotz, Korn’s research and Brotz’s research in The Black Jews of Harlem certainly overlapped in their ontological depictions of Jewish identity. This is not to argue that Korn was incorrect in assigning whiteness to at least some pre-abolition Jews. There certainly were Jews who understood themselves (and were considered by non-Jewish whites and blacks) as white people. It was only when whiteness as a metaphysical property defined the ontic contours of his research subject that these assumptions overdetermined and ultimately signified Korn’s rendering of non-white Jewish histories.

97 Ibid., 67
Yvonne Chireau’s article, “Black Culture and Black Zion: African American Religious Encounters with Judaism, 1790-1930, an Overview,” in her edited volume Black Zion: African American Religious Encounters with Judaism represented a recent contribution to the historical approaches to African American religious studies that had begun with historian C. Eric Lincoln’s earlier explorations of African American religion. In that article, Chireau explored how African Americans used their own cultural resources to interpret Judaism and make it relevant for the struggles and particularities of African American life. Critical to understanding the tension implied in the title of Chireau’s text was the notion of black people’s “religious encounters with Judaism.” Non-religious kinds of black/Jewish encounters received a much more nuanced treatment in her text. She specified her argument by including the following points.

With regard to the variety of religious encounters between African Americans and Judaism, one must consider two recurring themes. The first is analogies in the experiences of blacks and of the Jewish people, including their common histories of dispersion, bondage, persecution, and emancipation. These analogies facilitated the various adaptations of Judaism within black religion, including the adoption of the language and symbols of the Hebrew Scriptures, and the unique formulations of ritual within Afro-Jewish practices. The second theme concerns the self-delineation of black people as Jews, either by an inherited bicultural heritage or by the appropriation of Jewish accoutrements, underscoring the significance of Judaism as a viable source of black American identity. Although these themes may not represent all manifestations of the historical relationship between black religion and Judaism, they do acknowledge the convergence of these traditions, often occurring in experiences that are more complex and multifaceted than is suggested by the designation “black Jews.”

There is a tension in Chireau’s use of language here, and it is revealed by her article’s focus on two themes found in the study of African American Judaism. As indicated by her mention of “the appropriation of Jewish accoutrements,” both themes implied the sufficiency of ontological readings of Jewish presence. Although Chireau herself could not include all of the information relevant to African American encounters with Judaism, she opened the door to scholarly dialogue with a religious community that had, until her analysis in *Black Zion*, been traditionally explicitly depicted as deceitful and false. Chireau’s account attempted to distance itself from such value judgments, although her analysis retained the language and depiction of black Jews as allegorization, appropriation and adoption.99 Interestingly, without dismissing previous writings on the subject, Chireau’s approach did successfully move the conversation on African American Judaism forward. By partially redirecting the scholarship away from theologically divisive rhetoric and instead focusing on the socio-religious conditions of black Jewish groups, she laid the foundation for an articulation of black Jewish religion that could transcend ontological accounts of Jewishness.

Even more than Chireau’s approach, perhaps the most explicit account of attempts to transcend ontological Jewishness in studies of African American Jewry arose in the works of Yosef ben Jochannan and Jacob Dorman. Ben Jochannan’s work, *We The Black Jews*, has emerged as perhaps the most provocative critique of white normativity in Afro-

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99 Ibid., 16, 21, 22.
Jewish studies to be found in the English language. The book was a thought-provoking study on Ethiopian Judaism in antiquity and the present, as well as Jewish race relations as seen through the prism of African American Jewry. Though written in a loud, confrontational style, the book presented forceful arguments on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry's tradition. According to ben Jochannan, all the mythological stories relating to the Ethiopian monarchy's descent from King Solomon were based on the oral traditions of certain Ethiopians' Hebrew ancestry. For him the lack of written references to Ethiopian Jewish history has not been a significant problem. He combines social scientific scholarship with the oral traditions and reconstructs history from them both. According to him, Ethiopian Judaism has been in existence for thousands of years, and the evidence for its presence can be found in the influence of Judaism on popular Ethiopian culture.

In his writings ben Jochannan contended that subaltern historical evidence could provide the logical foundation for an expansion of the meaning of “Judaism” and “religion” beyond the confines of their roots in European discourses on civilization. He believed this principle should have included the narratives of African American Jewry as well as a variety of other Jewish traditions around the world.

Is Judaism (European, European-American, African, African-American, Asian, Asian-American, etc.) pluralistic or monistic in its development as it stands today? [italics mine] This question is of major significance. From the evidence so far revealed, it is

100 Yosef ben Jochannan, We The Black Jews (Baltimore: Black Classic, 1993), 91-92.

101 Ibid., 92-99.
without any doubt whatsoever pluralistic in origin and development. In this regard, it has, from its African beginnings and development in Sais (Egypt), even through its Hellenistic (European) transformation and re-identification with Greek mythology and dominant Christian influences, changed.\textsuperscript{102}

Jochannan’s point here is something the present study will repeatedly suggest—that any reasonable approach to Jewish historiography requires acknowledging a historical “origin and development” on the basis of evidence that is “pluralistic.” From his perspective, not only has this situation demanded a renewed historical appreciation of Jewish phenotypic embodiment (i.e.—Causasianness, Blackness, Brownness), it has rendered irrelevant the attempts by non-white Jews to prove their historical relationship to Euro-Jews.\textsuperscript{103} Ultimately, it is this debate about whether or not non-whites should be included or excluded from Jewish history that Jochannan considered a \textit{reductio ad absurdum}. Fatigued and exasperated from trying to demonstrate the historical connections between African and European peoples, he eventually admitted that Judaism, when taken in its historical complexity, was simply and plainly a “pluralistic” phenomenon. Hence the historiographic problem of locating the perspective of marginalized Jews could not be addressed in \textit{We The Black Jews} by simply applying a hermeneutics of suspicion toward ontologized \textit{ideas} of Jewish religion. This is because ben Jochannan’s recommendations for the pluralistic approach to research was a positive correction, but he seemed to assume in the work that Jewish religion moves through history in a disembodied manner.


\textsuperscript{103} Ibid, 189, 191-194. Also see ben-Jochannan, \textit{We the Black Jews}, 318-319.
For him, Judaism could be boiled down to a set of beliefs.\textsuperscript{104} Thus his disembodied form of Judaism did not only reinscribe ontological Jewishness in the form of a set of ideas; it did not seem entirely capable of accounting for the postcolonial historicity of many Jewish Diasporas.\textsuperscript{105}

Colonial configurations of ontological Jewishness were not only ideological; they were produced, propagated and policed through embodied historical agents. In other words, they were lived. Accounting for embodied Jewish agency may demand that historians abandon the assumption that Jewish history is the narrated movement of a disembodied set of religious ideas. What may be needed instead is an acute understanding of how embodied social roles have mediated the lived experiences of Jews, Hebrews, Israelites and their kin throughout American history, and it is this approach that has been ventured upon through the work of Jacob Dorman.

In his article, “I Saw You Disappear with My Own Eyes: Hidden Transcripts of New York Black Israelite Bricolage,” historian Jacob Dorman has theorized that “Black Israelite” leaders such as Rabbi Wentworth Matthews were polycultural bricoleurs influenced by a variety of religious and social forces.\textsuperscript{106} Explicitly attempting to move

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\item \textsuperscript{104} Ben-Jochannan, \textit{We the Black Jews}, xii.
\item \textsuperscript{105} These Diasporas are not only racial or geographic in genesis. Dispersions of gender apply equally to my description here. The point is driven home in ben-Jochannan’s description of “Women in the [Ethiopian Jewish] Community.” See ben-Jochannan, \textit{We the Black Jews}, 199-202, 206-210, esp. 207, 209: ben Jochannan’s assertion of the happiness of polygamous homes is rooted, like some of his other claims, in a traditional scriptural justification for the practice.
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beyond the depictions of Afro-Jews as “aggrieved protestors, weird cultists or colorful imposters,” Dorman closely examined a variety of materials in order to discern the dominant influences on the religious and intellectual development of Rabbi Wentworth Matthews.\[^{107}\] He concluded that Rabbi Matthews, far from being a deceptive charlatan, was a religious visionary and imaginative thinker who creatively drew upon Jewish symbols and ideas in order to fashion his own particular style of religious bricolage.

Dorman placed emphasis on the imaginal and spiritual agency of African American Jews in order to correct previous characterizations of them as solely politically reactionary black nationalists.\[^{108}\] But in order to do this, he reinscribed conclusions about Black Israelites that have sounded similar to the conclusions of Brotz, Korn, Landing and Chireau.

Black Israelites did not simply imitate Jews, but rather they were bricoleurs who constructed a polycultural religion that creatively reworked threads from religious faiths, secret societies and magical grimoires.\[^{109}\]

As evidenced by his description of the religious bricoleur, a commitment to transcending fixed, essentialized formulations of Jewishness has appeared to be one of Dorman’s intellectual goals.\[^{110}\] Yet Dorman’s approach, as manifested through this quote, assumed

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\[^{107}\] Ibid., 76-77.

\[^{108}\] Ibid. Dorman’s term for this phenomenon is their depiction as “aggrieved protesters.”

\[^{109}\] Ibid., 63.

\[^{110}\] Ibid., 68.
the racial ontologies established in the earlier works of Brotz, Landing and Chireau.

Who, for example, were the “Jews” he was referring to in the above passage? Were they white? If not, then were these Jews supposed to be understood in an ontological manner at all? In a note explaining his use of the term “Black Israelite,” Dorman appeared to give his readers a clue as to how he might answer these questions.

I use the term Black Israelites because it encompasses every [italics mine] African American faith that teaches descent from the ancient Israelites, from Rastafarians to Pentecostal Christians to Jews, and thereby reinforces the idea that they are all related to one another. It also avoids the mislabeling of people who might have considered themselves Black Hebrews but not Black Jews, for example, or whose religions shifted over time from Pentecostalism to Judaism. Finally, it is consonant with the fact [that] there was much more than just Judaism in the faith of Black Jews.  

Interestingly, while attempting to reassert human agency into the discussion on African American Jewry / Judaism, Dorman concomitantly reinscribed race into the discussion in precisely the way that has made it susceptible to the ontological formulations he attempted to resist. For reasons he does not explicate, describing “Black Israelites” in a way that “encompasses every African American faith” was relevant to his scholarly concerns. 

In addition, the notion of a particular Jewish faith being more than “just Judaism” is difficult to conceive. A person might ask if any form of Judaism is “just Judaism,” and if all forms of Judaism are polycultural styles of bricolage, then what exactly was it that was special, or in Dorman’s words, “hidden” and “secret” about Black

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111 Ibid., 77n2.

112 Ibid., 77n2.
Israelites? There is good reason to believe that Dorman’s approach, then, has portrayed “Black Israelites” as somehow extraordinary in the worlds of Jews and Judaism. And this extraordinariness seems comprehensible when ontological Jewishness (i.e.—the cultural form that Black Israelites, in Dorman’s words, “did not simply imitate”) is assumed at the outset.

I should like to stress that the shortcomings of Brotz’s, Landing’s, Dorman’s or others’ descriptions of African American Jews are far less important than the fact that their claims have consistently relied on ontological presumptions in order to make sense. In other words, understanding the previous studies’ conclusions about African American Jews is not as crucial for future research as understanding their assumptions regarding Jews in general. In order for their conclusions to be comprehensible at all, their assumptions must have been consistently maintained throughout the course of their research. Take the word choices of these studies, for example. Without explicitly endorsing notions of ontological Jewishness, when their assumptions regarding Jewish presence were brought into contact with phenotypically black people, these authors usually made an appeal to explain the origins of Black Judaism. The code words revealing this desire for an original explanation were consistent among the various studies: adoption, appropriation, modeling, mimicry, conversion, imitation, etc. All these words suggested the presence of cultural norms that may be understood as inherently

113 I say “good reason.” In Dorman’s case, I would not say that my reading is conclusive. Admittedly, my case may very well be overstated. Yet the ambiguity I am tracing in Dorman’s use of language demonstrates what can happen when explications of racism and race-thinking are largely ignored in one’s research, particularly in cases where racism is clearly the ruling ideological condition that must be confronted in order for a people to appear as historical. The anthropological idea of the “Black Israelite” is one such manifestation of the ruling ideological construct that must be confronted.
alien to the Africana Jews who simply manifested multiple and ambiguous kinds of human existences. When researchers focus on discovering the “motivation” behind why a group of people exists, their assumptions about human identity can appear to be driven by ontologizing norms, even when a discussion of symbolic appropriation is relevant to a scholarly discussion. Theoretically, one could (quite problematically) write about Jewish identity from a standpoint that describes the Ashkenazi Jewish world as a worldview that has mimicked, appropriated, adopted, taken on and self-deceptively reified a veneer of real Jewish people’s traditions. But what’s brought to the fore by the research on African American Jews is the following: The characterizations of Jews as imitations, deceivers and false repeatedly entered scholarly conversations only when the Jewish subjects were marked by a racial ontology of blackness. Thus it was the incorporation of anti-black racial assumptions into the research that consistently yielded evidence of conclusions grounded in ontological Jewishness.114 In the cases examined thus far, to see their racial ontologies at work, one need only have asked why the various researchers, upon coming into contact with Ashkenazic Jewry, did not typically feel the need to explain its existence. The reason appears obvious. One does not need to know about “the motivation that lay behind the emergence” of Ashkenazic Jewry in order to appreciate its meaningfulness. Yet for African American Jews, the only world in which their presence

114 A point of clarification. The construction of this sentence (and others like it) should not be interpreted as the author’s implicit endorsement of ontological blackness. It is simply a recognition that underneath the sites and spaces marked for epistemological colonization by ontological notions of humanity rests actual, real, living human beings who decide to live ordinary lives while being marked in extraordinary ways. See Lewis Gordon, Fanon and the Crisis of European Man (New York: Routledge, 1995), 91. Ontological blackness is the pejorative understanding of black people, not the dark-skinned people who may or may not understand themselves as black and yet have existed long before others decided to hate them.
could stimulate quests for their existence would have been a world in which they were not ordinarily understood to mundanely exist at all. It is a short step from this misunderstanding to the presumption that African American Jews do not, or worse, should not exist.

Theories rooted in ontological notions of Jewishness have had substantial limitations. Over half a century ago these limits had to be cast aside and taken as intellectual dilemmas to be solved in succeeding generations. But as we have seen, the wholesale absorption of the allegory and identification theses helped little when it came to removing concepts of Jewish identity from their ontological moorings. Eventually the caricatures of black Jews as allegorical and imitation would need considerable reexamination. In recent years, only a couple of studies have appeared which both focus on varieties of African American Jewry and boldly challenge ontological narrations of Judaism/Jewishness. One of these has been the research of Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz. Her book, *The Colors of Jews*, represents a new evolution in the literature available on African American Jews. Her work is a compilation of testimonies on various Jewish / Hebrew / Israelite self-identities, and it includes the perspectives of Jews from many non-rabbinic backgrounds. Specifically, her concept of “Diasporism” appears to transcend the trappings of ontological Jewishness and is consonant with at least religious Afro-Jews’ rendering of the appropriateness of sacred spatiality for communal membership. In her words,

> Diasporism begins but does not end with Jewish diversity and boundary crossing. Diasporism demands that we mix it up in ways we don’t even know yet. Diasporism places at the center our
memory of strangeness, and our desire (not duty, 
*desire*) to
welcome strangers. Diasporism means, given the multicultural
nature of the Jewish community, inside “the” Jewish community
we should expect to experience the simultaneity of home and
strangeness. If we are at an event that claims to be for the whole
Jewish community, at any given moment something must feel
unfamiliar to someone; it just shouldn’t always be the same people.
Creating an inclusive tradition means letting go of some
familiarity, welcoming some dissonance.  

As a result of her approach Kaye/Kantrowitz’s text could incorporate some perspectives
that, on their face, were contradictory and in competition. Her ability to use “dissonance”
in her search for a greater understanding of the racial polity of American Jewry allowed
the mundanity and ordinariness of African American Jewry / Judaism to appear—without
appeals to exceptionalism, exoticism, or other kinds of racial ontologies. Key to this
ability was her insistence that in conversations about African American Judaism, Jewish
racism as well as other discourses of race not be summarily dismissed or ignored for their
potential to impact our prejudices and knowledge. Her approach, when viewed against
this backdrop of the influence of ontological Jewishness on previous studies of African
American Jewry, is nothing less than a breath of fresh air. The assumptions of her text
make it clear she is aware of the dangers of essentializing human presence, while at the
same time describing in articulate detail the vectors of prejudice and oppression one finds

115 Melanie Kay/Kantrowitz, *The Colors of Jews: Racial Politics and Radical Diasporism*
(Bloomington: Indiana University, 2007), 221-222.

116 Ibid., xiii, 21-25.
in throughout American Jewry.\textsuperscript{117} In short, her work demonstrates the conceptual feasibility of an approach that fulfills the critical goals of postmodern Jewishness without slipping back into the trappings of ontological Jewishness. A Diasporist approach to the study of Africana Jewry, combined with a non-ontological rendering of Jewish faiths and cultures, demands a study of African American Jewry that summarily questions the scientific and conceptual adequacy of statements and ideas that are incomprehensible without ontological assumptions. Her approach is broad, and so it cannot be neatly contained only by the designation of “African American Jewish” studies. It is a theoretical work of Jewish studies that assumes the relevance of Africans, Latino/as, Asians and others to the topic of American Jewish studies in general. For this reason, it represents the most recent major development in our topic to date.

My concern with ontological Jewishness arises from a critique of the prevailing view in the study of Jews, a view that privileges not only European Jewish identities, but also those derived from and/or connected to rabbinic traditions. By constructing European and rabbinic heritages as the normative standard for understanding American Jewish historical presence, historians and others impose false standards onto Jews, Hebrews, Israelites and their kin whose histories and languages reflect neither European nor rabbinic traditions. This concern does not stem from a desire for multicultural approaches to Jewish studies. It is a cautious recognition that research based on colonial categories of human being can harm the people represented by that research. In light of this recognition, what I have noticed is that historians of American Jews have inherited a

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 60-65; her section on “Nationalism and Feminism” is an excellent exemplar of this aspect of her critical presentational style.
sharply limited set of conceptual tools with which to pursue their craft. The latest social and cultural research in Jewish studies has yet to sufficiently interrogate the relationship between the categories of “Judaism,” “religion,” “class,” “race,” “sex,” “gender,” “history,” etc. established during the centuries of European colonialism, and this lacunae in the scholarship needs to be addressed.

In the introduction to *American Judaism: A History*, Jonathan Sarna makes the following admission. In so doing, he demonstrates how Jewish racism can be made to seem as though it can legitimately be absent from general discussions of American Jewish religious history.

The very term “American Judaism” defies meaningful definition, for Jews as a people cannot be disentangled from Judaism as a faith. Traditionally, Judaism constitutes what is known as an ethnic church: its members distinguish themselves as much by their common “tribal” ancestry (real or imagined) as by their doctrines and practices. In reality, however… American Judaism cannot even be directly paralleled to Protestantism and Catholicism, since Judaism embraces many individuals who affiliate with no religious institutions whatsoever, but nevertheless carry a strong sense of Jewish identity based upon their Jewish descent and their commitment to secular, cultural, philanthropic, or nationalist Jewish causes. Any effort to offer even a reasonably comprehensive and coherent account of American Judaism must, as a consequence, fall short.118

This is a startlingly honest confession. Even though he disavows the coherency of his project, Sarna successfully employs a notion of Judaism that carries with it a series of

complex assumptions about the nature of religion. What we notice, however, is that the “American” aspect of American Judaism remains unexpounded. What could “American” mean here? The passage is written as though the reader knows what the American dimension of American Judaism represents. In order to address this conceptual vagueness, Sarna employs the term “religion” in the form of a broad and fundamental category of historical analysis. As he states,

the term “religion” needs to be construed broadly, so as to include not only “secular” movements but also those opposed to religion altogether. Jewish secularism, communism, and what came to be known as “Jewishness,” or “Yiddishkeit,” are, from the historian’s perspective, religions (“agnosticism does not preclude religiosity or moral seriousness”). They [all] fall within the purview of American Judaism.\(^{120}\)

Such statements exemplify Sarna’s desire to faithfully represent the past within the field of his scholarly concern and care. But his careful willingness to include certain notions of Jewish historicity within his scholarship forces him to assert contradictory ideas. Sarna’s “Judaism” must be understood as “religion,” even when it is “opposed to religion altogether.” Given the conceptual vagueness of “Judaism” here, the reader’s attention may be shifted away from what is arguably the most salient characteristic of North American, and especially United Statesian, religions in general—their racial

\(^{119}\) Ibid. For instance, among other concerns, Sarna must demonstrate how a “faith” can “embrace” people “who affiliate with no religious institutions”?

\(^{120}\) Ibid., xvii.
segregation. It is telling that Sarna avoids the implications of race and segregation in his early descriptions of the conceptual tools at work in his analysis. But by doing so, he not only relieves himself of the responsibility to account for these characteristics, he also gives his narrative the appearance of including diverse experiences of American Judaism. Although I am using *American Judaism* as an example, it is important to note that this approach to American Jewish religious history is not uncommon. The assumption that one can discuss American Judaism with no reference to America’s history of racial segregation in religion remains a widespread practice in scholarship. And despite the usual insistence that embodied racial/ethnic diversity rests “within the purview of Judaism,” such scholarship has consistently produced work that excludes Jews of color.

I should like to emphasize that these preliminary observations are in no way meant to lambaste any given scholar or academic organization with trumped-up charges of race prejudice. Scholarly oversights are a fundamental aspect of the academic enterprise, and I have pointed out the oversight of Jewish racism with presumably as much acumen as others will undoubtedly use to point out the oversights of the present dissertation. The more important issue has to do with the inadequate conceptual tools that some of our most respected and dedicated scholars must use in order to produce accounts of the past that are both digestible for a consuming public and suitable for

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122 Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America*, 189.
educational institutions that have inherited Euro-colonial and Western hegemonic accounts of human history. I am arguing that these inadequate conceptual tools largely rely on the uncritical adoption and use of ontological Jewishness in academic studies of Jews and Judaism.

**Rationale and Overview of Dissertation**

If ontological Jewishness has been such a pervasive aspect of understanding African American Jews in the scholarship, then what rationale suggests that the present dissertation can potentially overcome ontological Jewishness—particularly if the author is still using the language of ontological Jewishness (i.e.—the terms “Jews,” “Hebrews,” and “Israelites”) as a basis on which to construct his argument?

Part of the rationale for this dissertation’s thesis can be rooted in twentieth century research on slavery—a topic relevant to the study of both Jewish historical origins and the historical origins of modernity. This research suggests that dominant Western cultural norms may be insufficient for understanding the life worlds of African Americans and other historically enslaved and trafficked peoples. In his insightful essay, “Authority, Alienation and Social Death,” Orlando Patterson reminds his readers that historians and others miss important dimensions of the master-slave relationship when the hermeneutical tools used to understand that relationship are drawn only from the masters’ culturally dominant perspectives. This is because Patterson understands slavery as a “highly symbolized domain of human experience,” one ripe with opportunities for
influence by human religious consciousness. According to him, “on the cognitive or mythic level, one dominant theme emerges [in comparative studies of slavery], which lends an unusually loaded meaning to the act of natal alienation: this is the social death of the slave.”

By this Patterson is not saying that slaves have no potential to socialize. His point is that in virtually all systems of slavery, slave masters come to understand the slave as an animated, yet socially non-existent presence. According to this understanding, the social role of the slave is more important and more real than the person who performs the role. Citing Claude Meillassoux, Patterson argues that slaves undergo a de-socialization from the slave’s life as a free person and then a re-socialization into the slaveholder’s community as a slave. The re-socialization, however,

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124 Ibid., 102.

125 Ibid; Hagar Salamon, *The Hyena People: Ethiopian Jews in Christian Ethiopia* (Berkeley: University of California, 1999), 73-81. In these pages, Salamon dramatically wrote about this dynamic. She writes, “I was told the *barya* [Jewish-owned slaves] possessed no ancestral memory; that they were bereft of any knowledge of origin, completely cut off from their past: ‘He doesn’t know who his mother is,’ or ‘He has nothing in his head from his parents.’ For the Beta Israel, ancestral memory is a precious possession… Parents teach a person how to be a human being… To lack this ancestral source of information was to be other than human… As a tabula rasa, this non-human being also lacked religion… ‘They have no faith, they believe in trees and stones, in nothing, just in some nonsense, in some tree or something.’ Even after the slaves had undergone the conversion ritual, they continued to be perceived as less than human strangers: ‘He doesn’t know how to pray, just says bo! bo! bo!’” Ibid., 77: Salamon goes on to describe how the religious caste of certain Ethiopian slaves’ owners complexly predetermined how their slaves were understood in their masters’ society: “The *barya* of a Jew was a Jew, the *barya* of a Christian was a Christian, and Muslim, Muslim.”
entails “the paradox of introducing him as a nonbeing.” This particular form of non-being is extremely important for understanding the history of African American spirituality.

From a phenomenological perspective, the process of transforming people into chattel produces interesting consequences for both a slaveholding society and its historians. This is because a slaveholding society must create institutions that reinforce the slaves’ historical and social deaths. For Patterson “social death” is a way of saying that someone’s life does not matter. If a person is socially dead, it makes no difference to the dominant society whether they live or die, survive or perish, thrive or starve. Socially dead people are assumed to contribute little or nothing to the society in which they live, regardless of what they actually do. As a result, scholars can overlook the historical contributions of enslaved people simply because of the social death imposed upon them by the slave masters’ dominant culture. The paradox is that the slaves’ very lives constitute performative contradictions of their alleged social death. Even after slavery is abolished, a slaveholder’s descendants (biological, intellectual and otherwise) may still consider the descendants of slaves to be socially dead. Social death is therefore not limited to the immediate historical conditions attendant to the initial transformation of

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126 Patterson, “Authority, Alienation and Social Death,” 102.

127 For a recent attempt at articulating this importance, see James Noel, Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World (New York: Palgrave, 2009).

128 Patterson, “Authority, Alienation and Social Death,” 102.
humanity into chattel.\textsuperscript{129} It can be institutionalized. But for my purposes, I would like to contend that if historians and other scholars consult the descendants of Jewish-owned slaves, then new understandings of Jewish history might be acquired.\textsuperscript{130}

In the case of pre-abolition American Jewish societies, the following aspect of Patterson’s analysis has heretofore been ignored—that “although the slave is socially a nonperson and exists in a marginal state of social death, he is not an outcaste. The point must be emphasized in view of the easy use often made of the cast concept in interpreting American slavery and its postemancipation consequences.”\textsuperscript{131} Patterson’s point here is an important one. Historical recognition of the distinction between a people cast at the bottom rung of a social order (i.e.—“Others”) and those located perpetually outside that order, calls for a historian’s different relationship to each people’s artifactual raw materials. This is because anthropologists have repeatedly noticed that various societies’ attempts to make enslaved people a distinct “caste” (such as during Jim Crow segregation) have proven counterproductive. Because of the social, intellectual and

\textsuperscript{129} Lewis R. Gordon, \textit{Her Majesty’s Other Children: Sketches of Racism from a Neocolonial Age} (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefied, 1997), 28, 42-44.

\textsuperscript{130} Salamon, \textit{The Hyena People}, 117. Here Hagar honestly explains her reaction to Ethiopian Jews’ metaphysical assumptions. “For example, the notion that a person could be an ordinary man by day and a hyena by night is something the Western mind could grasp only as a nightmarish fantasy. Even though I had been educated as an anthropologist, trained to accept the exotic, the sheer fact that people sitting across from me, speaking Hebrew in an Israeli apartment, were relating this to me casually, as a matter of course, shocked me. My own need for constancy and coherence continually impelled me to seek them where there was little or none.” From the perspective of the present study, Hagar’s honesty and subsequent self-questioning represents a move forward in academic strivings against prescriptions of ontological Jewishness.

\textsuperscript{131} Patterson, “Authority, Alienation and Social Death,” 113.
physical proximities required to carry out their masters’ wishes, slaves need to be intimate with their masters. They can be so intimate as to perform social roles that are virtually identical to that of slave masters. Yet because they are believed to have no social existence, their performances of these social and cultural roles simply do not matter. On the other hand, persons of different castes are not allowed to be intimate at all; in fact, the purpose of most caste systems is to eliminate and/or minimize the possibility of intimacy between the in-group and the outcastes.

The rich historical and anthropological data on these societies indicate that slaves were held to be distinct from the caste groups in question. There was never any marriage, or even illicit sexual relations, between the outcaste group and ordinary persons, whereas such relations were common between “free” males and slave women… …There was an almost perverse intimacy in the bond resulting from the power the master claimed over his slave. The slave’s only life was through and for his master. Clearly, any notion of ritual avoidance and spatial segregation would entail a lessening of this bond. Second, the assimilation of the slave to the status of an occupationally specialized caste would undermine one of his major advantages—the fact that he was a natally alienated person who could be employed in any capacity precisely because he had no claims of birth. Slaves universally were not only sexually exploited in their role as concubines, but also in their role as mother-surrogates and nursemaids. However great the human capacity for contradiction, it has never been possible for any group of masters to suckle at their slave’s breast as infants, sow their wild oats with her as adolescents, then turn around as adults and claim that she was polluted.  

Up until this point, we have been laying the groundwork for a philosophical critique of social and historical research on African American Jews during pre- and post-abolition

\[132\] Ibid., 115-116.
times. One may notice, however, that Patterson’s insight on the relationship between human intimacy and slavery increases the likelihood that Africana Jewish traditions existed between the 17th and the 19th centuries in the Americas. Given the role that intimacy played in the life of enslaved peoples, we now have a means of interpreting various aspects of pre-abolition Jewry from the standpoint of Jewish-owned slaves and their descendants.\footnote{Consider how human intimacy functioned on the Jewish plantations established in colonial Suriname (or Dutch Guyana). As the story is usually told, the Jewish synagogues of colonial Dutch Guyana were primarily of two kinds—Sephardic and Ashkenazic. What’s interesting is that the Jews of Dutch Guyana who represented these two traditions behaved more along the lines of a caste relationship than each of the two groups did in relation to the Africans they owned.\footnote{Jonathan Schorsch, 	extit{Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World} (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004), 166-169, 252-253; Rachel Frankel, “Remnants and Antecedents of Jodensavanne: The Synagogues and Cemeteries of the First Permanent Plantation Settlement of New World Jews” in 	extit{The Jews and the Expansion of Europe to the West 1450-1800}, Paolo Bernardini and Norman Fiering, eds. (New York: Berghahn, 2001), 425-426; Mordecai Arbell, 	extit{The Jewish Nation of the Caribbean: The Spanish-Portuguese Jewish Settlements in the Caribbean and the Guianas} (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2002), 151.} They existed in a state of affirmed

\footnote{My formulation here is admittedly macro-institutional. If a standpoint is a negotiation or achievement that emerges from a social location, then one may question the extent to which the kind of nothingness pointed out by Patterson refers to a standpoint at all. The historical conditions of African Americans’ public appearance were overwhelmingly affected by their allegedly non-historical existence as property. I would argue that this means that it is highly questionable, when using the dominant culture’s microinstitutional framework of interpretation, whether enslaved persons occupied a social location at all in the context of pre-abolition America. See Sandra Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology,” in 	extit{Feminist Epistemologies}, eds. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993), 54-55.}
alterity (or an acknowledgement of the other group’s “Jewish” otherness/identity) toward each other while concomitantly existing in a state of denied alterity (or a refusal to acknowledge the other group’s “Jewish” otherness/identity) to the Africans in their own households. The existence of distinct Ashkenazic and Sephardic communities, each of which was tracing Jewish identity by conversion and/or genealogy, gives historians a window into the viewpoints of the Africans who lived intimately alongside them. If, for example, it was common for Sephardic Euro-Jews to create and sustain biological families with their slaves, but almost never do this with Ashkenazic Euro-Jews, then from the slaves’ perspectives, a narrative of Jewishness by virtue of ancestry easily arose—especially since the Europeans were willing to designate other Europeans “Jews” with whom they had no such intimate dealings. Sephardic Jews acknowledged Ashkenazic Jews as Jews, but they rarely mixed with them. \(^{135}\) Conversely, Ashkenazic Jews acknowledged Sephardic Jews as Jews, but they, too rarely sexually mixed with the Sephardic Jews. It was much more often, however, that Sephardic Jews would sexually mix with their Africans. \(^{136}\) And Ashkenazic Jews mixed with their Africans. \(^{137}\) Both communities, therefore, lived intimately alongside enslaved African populations. But if the Sephardic and Ashkenazic mulattos who emerged from these unions intermarried with each other or other people of color, how then was it just or sensible that their

\(^{135}\) Arbell, *The Jewish Nation of the Caribbean*, 112.


families not be considered Jewish by either the white Sephardic or the white Ashkenazic Jews—who refused to marry each other? *African people’s reflections on these questions* about the relationship between sexual violence, tradition and kinship *constituted the historical framework* of African Americans’ alternative understandings of Jewish identity and religious practice. The historical events giving rise to these questions, as well as the philosophical and religious responses provided by enslaved African peoples, may be understood as among the earliest constituted plausibility structures of African American Jewish, Hebrew and Israelite spirituality. For our purposes, these structures bring to mind a new set of artifactual objects upon which to reflect, and from these objects, evidence of new historical narratives may be discerned.

Biological ties were only one type of emergent narrative for the religious worldviews of American Jews of color. The centrality of slavery to Euro-colonial enterprises was another. Enslaved people were instrumental in affecting the religious debates, economic structures, political movements and sexual behaviors of Euro-

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138 Other such questions could have related to anthropological or historical problems, such as “what does my enslavement mean?” Or, “how can I survive as an enslaved person?” Whatever the specific content of the question or context, its answer was not something genetically derived from whites, but was rather a critical reflection on their American experiences, experiences which often did include violent encounters with whites. It was the reflections on this violence and other aspects of African American experiences that made African American Hebrew religious thought historically distinctive. The obvious answer, therefore, to genetic inquiries about Afro-Jewish existence is humanity as such.

American communities. As Patterson informs us, enslaved Africans lived in close, proximate spaces alongside their owners. The enslaved populations were thus not simply owned by their traffickers. They observed them. And they did so in a social context premised on the assumption that their observations were either meaningless or irrelevant. Yet the proximity necessary for the maintenance of slavery is precisely what cultivated the historical conditions for the plausible constructions of Africana Jewish worldviews.

Consider, for example, black people’s proximity to sacred religious sites. As is well known, enslaved Africans were often given the responsibility to care for Jewish holy places such as cemeteries and synagogues.\(^\text{140}\) Others were knowledgeable about the appropriate role of a Jewish-owned slave during religious observances such as Shabbat, Yom Kippur or Passover.\(^\text{141}\) Cooking food for the master required knowledge of *kashrut* and other Jewish religious laws concerning diet.\(^\text{142}\) At this point, I hope it is clear that by


“Jews,” “Hebrews,” “Israelites” and/or their kinfolk, I am not referring to a primarily European-derived population. My contention, rather, is that the moral and historical contradictions (not observances) revealed by Euro-colonial behaviors and their aftermath constituted at least some of the plausibility structures for the creolized worldviews of many Africana Jews forced to live the underside of that reality. This is a type of Judaism that has escaped researchers in the past. It was a Judaism that was not singular in historical origin or manifestation, and it was not a rare phenomenon.\textsuperscript{143} Returning to Patterson’s analysis:

A consideration of the relation of slavery to caste leads us back to where we began: the liminality of the slave is not just a powerful agent of authority for the master, but an important route to the usefulness of the slave for both his master and the community at large. The essence of caste relations and notions of ritual pollution is that they demarcate impassable boundaries. The essence of slavery is that the slave, in his social death, lives on the margin between community and chaos, life and death, the sacred and secular. Already dead, he lives outside the mana of the gods and can cross the boundaries with social and supernatural impunity…\textsuperscript{144}

\textsuperscript{143} Given the interaction of blacks with large segments of North American society, by the mid-19\textsuperscript{th} century, it is likely that over one-half of all Jewish households in the United States were multi-racial. See Friedman, \textit{Jews and the American Slave Trade}, 106-107, 110-112, 155-157; Marcus, \textit{United States Jewry Vol.1}, 585-586. These figures are based on a racially divided understanding of Jewish census data. The premise behind my contention, as well as the argument generally being advocated in this section, is that African people’s perspectives on what constitutes their household(s) existence(s) is an equally legitimate perspective from which to view Jewish people’s daily life. Such a premise does not assert Afro-Jewish people’s existence to be exceptional for human beings, but ordinary instead.

\textsuperscript{144} Patterson, “Authority, Alienation and Social Death,” 117-118.
Concerning research on Jews during the pre-abolition period, the important historical question is not, “Did Jewish slave owners convert their slaves?” Rather, it is “What did ‘being / becoming Jewish’ look like from the enslaved Africans’ points of view?” Previous mistreatments of the issue of Africans who converted to Judaism arose not from a misunderstanding of the halakhic requirements for the conversion of a non-Jewish slave. They arose from a misunderstanding of the nature of the slavery actually practiced in the Americas of the pre-abolition period. That kind of slavery, not the slavery debated by rabbis during the first millennium of the Common Era, demands a historiographic response on its own human scientific terms. And those scientific terms must take seriously both the cultural particularities and the institutionalized marginalities of Jews, Hebrews and Israelites who were trafficked, purchased and for generations domesticated and forced to work in Euro-American homes—not only in plantation fields, but in homes. Despite how it has appeared to other historians, then, the historiographic issues surrounding the study of Africana Judaism never did arise from narrow readings of rabbinic law. The issues rather depended on whose logic and agency historians chose

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to acknowledge. Could Europeans and Africans both interpret Judaism and Jewishness with equal validity? If not, then why? If so, then why has so much research on African American Jews reflected white and/or Eurocentric race bias in their ontological norms of identity construction?

On the basis of the foregoing questions, it should be clear that ontological human natures, such as ontological Jewishness or ontological whiteness, cannot be the conceptual basis upon which an adequate study of African American Jewish populations can be executed. This situation is a feature of

the systems of knowledge constituted by the process of conquest and colonization, which always erupted with discovery, on the one hand, and it is also constituted by the processes of resistance borne out of those events the consequence of which is an effect of both on each other. In both instances, the gnostic practices could function at subterranean levels. Colonial practices, for example, haunt modern gnostic practices that make no claim of colonial intent even to the point of being, in some cases, explicitly anti-imperial. The struggle for liberation, for instance, is difficult precisely because of its location within such gnostic practices, the result of which is the proliferation of more endemic identities and values, which in this case means more “Africanisms.”

The extent to which ontological understandings of Judaism, therefore, were engendered “by the process of conquest and colonization, which always erupted with discovery” is the extent to which those understandings are manifestations of epistemological colonialism. Based on the foregoing observations about the connections between pre-abolition Jewish slave societies and the maintenance of Jewish identities amongst

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147 Lewis Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2008), 204.
enslaved Africana peoples, I contend that the methods used to research Africana Jews constitute premier sites for studying the onset and maintenance of epistemological colonialism. Referring to the debt that studies such as the present one owe to the phenomenology of Frantz Fanon, Lewis Gordon writes that they must deal with the concept of

epistemological colonization at the methodological level. Here Fanon advances the demand for radical self-reflective thought. Without such a requirement, colonizing forces could move from the focus of discussion to infecting the mode of presenting thought itself. If methods have been colonized, then the outcomes of inquiry could become affirmations of colonialism. We see Fanon’s phenomenology coming to the fore here, for what is this form of critique but a suspension of methodological claims, of making method itself an object of inquiry whose ontological status must be suspended? [italics mine] We can call this the Fanonian phenomenological reduction.148

Given the role of slavery and human trafficking in the cultural genesis of both ancient Israelite peoples and modern peoples, the implications of our phenomenological approach are significant. Many assumptions involved in researching the cultural, social and ideational processes of Jewish humanity are contingent on those processes being represented through the lens of colonial categories of understanding Jewish history. Although it is not the case that all sources of Jewish knowledge may be traced to colonialism, it is true that the ontological forms of Jewishness most privileged in Jewish studies scholarship (as well as, one could argue, many other fields of human science) are

148 Ibid., 85.
drawn largely from Eurocentric and colonial-era understandings. Broadly speaking, Fanon’s insight on suspending the “ontological status” of methods in the study of human beings means that a great deal of postcolonial-era research on human beings may be contributing to more distorted understandings of humanity, not less. Because the foundational assumptions about the ontologies of human presence may be misguided, research that is based on those assumptions may also be misguided. As a result, the more research that is accumulated about a given social or cultural group could mean that less and less is actually being understood about that group as time goes on and more people are exposed to the research’s fallacious conceptual foundations. Applied to the present study, this observation suggests that one cannot only use concepts most appropriate for understanding Jewish slave masters in order to rigorously study and understand the social worlds of enslaved Africana Jewish peoples, their descendants and other Hebrew peoples trafficked across various parts of the globe. Although it seems that the humanistic Jewish sciences will be more equipped to understand the histories of these Jewish populations if those sciences prepare researchers to identify both subaltern evidences of Jewish existence as well as whatever phenomena the dominant scientific cultures sanction as “Jewish artifacts,” a new written history is not the telos of the present study. Rather, I will conduct three Fanonian/Gordonian phenomenological reductions of this situation in

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149 Peskowitz, *Spinning Fantasies*, 157-158, esp. Peskowitz’s elucidation of the political dimensions of essentializing (read: ontologizing) Jewish identity for purposes of constructing a “Jewish history,” itself the result of Euro-Jewish attempts to survive their oppression, colonization and potential extermination by non-Jewish Europeans.

150 Hidden in this dilemma may be nothing less than what Fanon might call a disciplinary “crisis” of the human sciences in the form of “cultural studies,” particularly in the latter’s postmodern hermeneuticist manifestations.
order to indicate what direction the Jewish and humanistic sciences in general may take in transcending movements towards the cultural, historical and epistemological liberation of Jewish humanity. The intellectual project here is decidedly anti-colonial in orientation and purpose.

The present chapter of this dissertation contains an introduction, a critical survey of previous research assumptions and a guiding rationale for the study of African American Jews.

Chapter two will outline a series of basic themes found in Lewis Gordon’s anti-colonial phenomenology. Among these themes will be the dangers associated with ontologizing humanity and the problems for the Jewish and human sciences posed by efforts to reify human presence. Various concepts will be introduced in the effort to describe Gordon’s particular brand of postcolonial philosophy. Among those concepts will be the following: ontological Jewishness (and other ontological fallacies), the social problem, phobogenesis, world-constitution, anonymity and subalternity.

Chapter three will use Gordon’s anti-colonial theories to engage in the study’s first and second phenomenological reductions. In that chapter I will present the reader with various examples of artifactual phenomena relevant to the study of African American Jewry. On the basis of these examples, I will argue that the phenomenon of a “Jewish artifact” does not immediately refer to a given historical narrative or constitute evidence of any narrative in particular. To insist otherwise is to mask what is, in fact, an ontological rendering of historical Jewishness. Any uncritical assertion that “Jewish artifacts” simply are evidence of a certain historical narrative is an ontological claim. Hence the dogmatic equivocation of artifactual reality with evidence should be viewed
with caution, because it can actually be a manifestation and defense of epistemological colonialism in human scientific research methodology.

After having shown how artifacts can be seen both as ontological and as evidence of new possibilities for Jewish historical scholarship, the second phenomenological reduction will offer a basis on which to construct a “coextensive” account of historical artifacts. This means that if an artifact is not necessarily evidential, then it is possible that an artifact can be interpreted in many historically possible ways, including non-ontological ones. In chapter three I will use this relationship between artifacts, evidence and historical possibility to offer two sets of artifacts: (1) letters from the Bertram Korn Collection at the American Jewish Archives, and (2) documentation from the Kansas State Historical Society of African American Israelites’ institutionalization of gender segregation into one brand of African American Judaism. If artifacts are not the same as evidence, then one has a means of deciphering these extant artifacts to construct entirely new narratives which remained latent and yet, preserved in the standing archive. This archival material will be composed of primary sources concerned with post-abolition African American Jewry. But by consulting these sources, I will demonstrate that significant evidence suggests the presence of African American Jews may be asserted to date back to the beginnings of the European colonial conquest of the Americas.151

151 See Gordon, Fanon and the Crisis of European Man, 27, esp. his statement about the distinction between Jews and their pejorative depiction. It is important to point out here that there has always been a sharp contrast between how scholars have articulated the historical origins of African American Jews and how African American Jews have articulated them. According to many researchers, “Black Israelite” religious cultures did not exist before the 1890’s. The premise being suggested by my argument here is that the “Black Israelite,” understood as such, is actually an exotic caricature of Hebrews, Israelites and their kinfolk who happen to have darker skin. These two are not the same
In chapter four, I will conduct the third and final phenomenological reduction. In it I will use primary and secondary sources in order to demonstrate that African American Hebrew and Israelite histories may be traced back for hundreds of years. This chapter will therefore not only question the role of language in research on African American Jews (i.e.—the conceptual adequacy of the “Black Israelite” label), it will offer a new interpretation of the history of race in American Judaism and pose challenges to research that claims to be representing black Jewish history, yet actually engages in a failed dialectical project of Jewish racial and sexual recognition.

A major key to articulating these concerns about the politics of Jewish racial recognition will be found in the fifth and last chapter’s introduction of varieties of non-ontological Jewishness. Each non-ontological Jewishness posited will demonstrate that it is possible for Jews as Jews to engage in constructive communicative praxis while nonetheless resisting the reduction of their Jewishness into ontological forms of Jewish humanity.

By the end of the present study, the reader will hopefully have noticed significant logical similarities between my analysis and recent developments in feminist research methodology. The similarities are not accidental. Appreciating the racializing aspects

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of Jewish sexuality and gender will help provide fuller accounts of the methods used to study African American Jewry, and as I will show, a key to understanding sex and gender in the racial formations of American Jewry rests in identifying the ontological dimensions of who “counts” as Jewish in one’s research, an interpretive process often rooted in Euro-masculinist ontologies of Jewish family composition. These dynamics will be revealed with greater complexity as the course of the present study develops.

As stated earlier, although the present work contains a great deal of historical reflection, it is not intended to be a historical study of African American Jews. Rather, it can be most accurately described as a philosophical case study in the form of anti-colonial phenomenology’s critique of certain methodologies in the human sciences. At particular points, such as in the overview of Gordon’s oeuvre, I will provide conceptual clarifications for terms that have, in the past, been used in ambiguous or highly specialized ways. These clarifications, while at times cumbersome, are important in order to situate my analysis in relation to other theoretical works dealing with problems in the research methodologies of the human sciences. In previous studies, some researchers assumed their concepts were widely understood and therefore adequate for understanding Africana Jews’ cultural behaviors. But as a result, their questioning of African and African American Jews’ legitimacy was difficult to avoid.153 Even though


153 For a good example of the limitations of approaches which do not clarify their conecptual formulations, see Harold Goldfarb, “Blacks and Conversion to Judaism,” in *A
crucial ambiguities and exclusions are inevitable when using the medium of written language, I have tried through these clarifications to minimize the influence of such bias in my own work. My own assumption is that with simply a more honest approach, efforts to understand how Jewish cultures and identities have moved in alternative racial/ethnic spaces can now be expanded. Yet this expansion of understanding can paradoxically take place through a restriction of cultural-linguistic concerns.\(^{154}\) This dissertation has thus been written to help move all such efforts toward epistemological decolonization forward, not only by giving future researchers a clearer picture of the historical, intellectual and cultural evolution of various Afro-Jewish Diasporas, but also by showing how this picture contributes to a more adequate, broad and humane understanding of Jewish humanity.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate the insight that how one interrogates various dimensions of human life will inevitably affect the kinds of answers reaped by one’s interrogation.\(^{155}\) For this reason alone, the mode of one’s scientific inquiry into

\(^{154}\) This follows from the reflections on symbolic form in the analysis of David Lewis’ approach to unrestricted quantification. The difference is that my approach does not end with an infinite regress of interpretation, as in some postmodern hermeneuticist approaches. In the case of Fanon’s and Gordon’s phenomenology, appeals to reality are legitimate, provided they are held in critical tension with a hermeneutic openness and an aversion to the temptations of assimilating metaphysics into ontology. See Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 91-93.

\(^{155}\) For an excellent re-statement of this principle as well as its consequences for science, see the preface of Alison Wylie’s *Thinking from Things: Essays in the Philosophy of Archaeology* (Berkeley: University of California, 2002), xiv-xv.
human affairs can undermine the quality of information made available to researchers.\footnote{Gordon, \textit{Bad Faith and Antibleak Racism}, 5-6. I interpret Gordon’s ontological claims concerning bad faith as an effort to shift the modal logic underlying the study of humanity. (See footnotes, numbers 31 and 32 above.) Concerning the relationship between hermeneutic applications of bad faith and ontology, see Gordon’s response to J.L.A. Garcia in \textit{Her Majesty’s Other Children}, 124.}

The cases presented so far demonstrate how difficult it may be for researchers who write in a scholarly tradition to challenge the assumptions upon which their tradition was built. Yet such challenges are necessary when, in the words of Victor Anderson, it becomes apparent that human life has transcended the “categorical, essentialist, and representational languages” of its depiction.\footnote{Anderson, \textit{Beyond Ontological Blackness}, 11.} Addressing this situation involves dealing with what Lewis Gordon calls a “racist Zeitgeist” or the problem of making sure that humane institutions do not, in the name of humanity, devolve into inhumane ones.\footnote{Gordon, \textit{Bad Faith and Antibleak Racism}, 5.} If the scholarly tradition of Jewish studies is to be conceived as a humane institution, then it should not manifest inhumane scholarship. In other words, Jewish feminists and womanists are absolutely correct when they insist that researchers in Jewish studies must know which questions are the right ones to ask. A humane scholarship demands that one not only understand how researched people constitute meaning, but also that one acquire this understanding in a way that does not violate the meaning of their humanity. Thus if the goal of the humanistic Jewish sciences is to produce scholarly meanings of Jewish life-worlds, then presumptively limiting the potential meaningfulness of those life-worlds

\footnote{Gordon, \textit{Bad Faith and Antibleak Racism}, 5-6. I interpret Gordon’s ontological claims concerning bad faith as an effort to shift the modal logic underlying the study of humanity. (See footnotes, numbers 31 and 32 above.) Concerning the relationship between hermeneutic applications of bad faith and ontology, see Gordon’s response to J.L.A. Garcia in \textit{Her Majesty’s Other Children}, 124.}

\footnote{Anderson, \textit{Beyond Ontological Blackness}, 11.}

\footnote{Gordon, \textit{Bad Faith and Antibleak Racism}, 5.}

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helps institutionalize a racist Zeitgeist in Jewish Studies scholarship.  

In the next chapter we will examine a variety of theoretical tools and philosophical concepts found in the work of phenomenologist Lewis Gordon. Gordon’s phenomenological tradition has been designed to assist researchers who wish to avoid the many pitfalls of a racist Zeitgeist. I have chosen to focus on Gordon’s particular phenomenology for three reasons. First, since Gordon’s earliest published works, he has noted how the study of Jewish “blackness” can help one understand the dangerous implications of scientific enterprises driven by ontological prejudices. Second, because his phenomenology has been largely influenced by the work of Frantz Fanon, it has been explicitly formulated to address many problems that both conceptual blackness and lived blackness pose for racially exclusive traditions of research. Third, Gordon has publicly stated these concerns in coordination with both his own lived experience as an African American Jew and his impressions of academic research in the field of Jewish studies. His works are thus timely and relevant for a philosophical analysis of race in the humanistic Jewish sciences. To an examination of his anti-colonial phenomenology we now turn.

159 The main premise for this assertion is that meaningfulness has a particular relation to sense and thus referents, which may or may not be real. See Gordon, Fanon and the Crisis of European Man, 51.

160 Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism, 3.

161 Gordon, Fanon and the Crisis of European Man, 14.

CHAPTER 2:

ONTOLOGICAL HUMANITY AND THE SOCIAL PROBLEMS
OF THE HUMAN SCIENCES

The present study is more than a philosophical work about African American Jews. It is a case study in methodological problems of the human sciences. As was indicated by the literature review, researchers studying African American Jews often did so while privileging ontological forms of Jewishness. The problem is that these attempts to force human beings into preconceived ontologies, even if done in good faith, ultimately lowered both the value of the scholars’ work and the value of the cultural work produced by the people studied.

The present chapter intends to outline Lewis Gordon’s postcolonial phenomenology of the humanistic sciences. It will provide a background set of concepts for assessing the impact that scholarly bias and prejudice can have on the research on African American Jewry. Among the many background ideas to be investigated will be the following: ontological Jewishness (and other ontological fallacies), the social problem, phobogenesis, world-constitution, anonymity, theology, and subalternity. According to Gordon, one way of addressing the theoretical problem of human value raised by imposing ontological categories onto human subjects is by performing the relevant teleological suspensions of disciplinarity.163 This means that scholars must have tools to let their readers know when their assessments are being guided by their own or

163 Lewis Gordon, Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Trying Times (Boulder: Paradigm, 2006), 33-34.
other people’s prejudices. (Prejudice here is not meant in the pejorative sense. It simply
means presuming the adequacy of taken-for-granted meaning-criteria as they are
constructed within the boundaries of one's disciplinary perspective.) The background
ideas to be invoked in the present chapter are meant to help scholars more carefully
investigate and describe taken-for-granted meanings found in the social world. I propose
therein that if scholars and researchers can reveal their prejudices more honestly and
accurately, then the value of their work can improve. But such improvement will stand at
a nadir if scholars continue to impose categories onto human subjects of study without
admitting and addressing a variety of biases and prejudices that inform the social worlds
attendant to any scholarly enterprise. By this I mean that scholars should be able to
publicly and critically assess their bias in such a manner that it will make their scholarly
methods and goals clearer. Providing future researchers with some conceptual tools to
accomplish this task will remain the primary goal of what follows.

It’s the morning of Shabbat and I’m walking toward a local shul. It’s the first
time I have visited this congregation, a historically Ashkenazic synagogue located in an
urban, Afro-Caribbean community in the northeastern United States. Upon arriving, I
proceed to the side entrance, as directed by a sign placed in the front of the building.
Immediately after walking into the door, I see a black man descend from the stairs
leading up into the prayer room. His look is one of concern. His arm is stretched out,

164 Lewis Gordon, “African-American Philosophy, Race, and the Geography of Reason,”
Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Boulder: Paradigm, 2006), 33-35.

165 Lewis Gordon, Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and
and he hastily walks toward me, as if something urgently needs my attention. Now upon seeing the man, I assume he is Jewish. In fact, given his presence in the synagogue on Shabbat, I have every reason to believe a Jewish person is there before me. But after we converse later, I “see” the man more clearly and learn that this black gentleman I mistook for a Jew is actually a non-Jewish caretaker of the synagogue building.

“Can I help you?” he asks.

“Oh, no thanks,” I respond. “I’ve just come for the service.”

The man immediately shakes his head. “No, no. This is not what you think. This is a Jewish temple,” he emphasizes.

“I know,” I said. “I’m Jewish.” Thinking the matter has been resolved, I begin to walk toward the staircase. (At this point I can hear the men upstairs reciting prayers for the Shaharit service.)

“Oh, but you can’t go up there right now,” he says.

“Oh, really?” I ask, confused. “Why not?”

“Because they’re upstairs having prayer right now.”

“I know,” I respond, visibly frustrated. “That’s why I came here. I want to attend the morning minyan.” (Sometimes the use of code words reinforces the point. This time it didn’t.)

“No, you don’t understand,” he said, in a nearly desperate tone of voice. “Today is their Sabbath, and they’re upstairs right now praying!”

In response to the commotion downstairs, one of the congregants descends into the lobby area. He is an elderly white gentleman wearing a yarmulke and prayer shawl. Upon seeing me, he squints his eyes and asks in a firm tone, “Can I help you, sir?”
The black gentleman interrupts: “I was trying to tell him that you were upstairs praying, but he won’t listen…”

At this point I speak to the white gentleman in Hebrew. I introduce myself by politely explaining my name, background and purposes for visiting the congregation.

“So you’re Jewish?” he asks with a confused look.

“Ken,” I respond.

A broad smile comes over his face. “So come on upstairs!!” he says with some excitement. “I don’t see what the problem is!!…”

If my experience of African American Jewish life has been typical, then I suspect accounts such as the one above reveal a humorous underside to the politics of American Jewish identity. I also suspect that experiences such as this one are not infrequent occurrences. After the recitation of morning prayers, the black gentleman approached me and apologized. He said that he himself was not Jewish and that he didn’t “know” I was. Although at the time I was quite offended that a black man could not see another black man as Jewish, it has become clear to me since then that despite our shared experiences related to phenotypic blackness, he and I were all the while using two very different frameworks of common knowledge to detect Jewish historical appearance. After all, my prejudiced opinions about him, although certainly more reasonable, were revealed to be just as erroneous as his. Recall that upon first noticing him, I felt certain that he was

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166 Note: Not all prejudices are inappropriate or unreasonable. The black gentleman was, in effect, saying that I could not be a Jew, while I, on the other hand, was granting possibility to his existence. In other words, it was not my belief that the black gentleman could not possibly be a non-Jew, only that I initially suspected him to be Jewish. I realized my error when he said so, whereas he appeared to realize his error only after noticing my relation to the whites in the situation. The main point is that these two
Jewish and that the congregation was a racially integrated one. I was wrong on both counts. But then again, why else would a black man be in a synagogue on Shabbat morning? I could hear myself thinking: why would anyone but Jews be at a synagogue on Shabbat? Both my initial sight of this man, a man which I certainly believed to be Jewish, as well as his initial sight of me, exemplify an aspect of experience that cannot be overlooked in our phenomenological reflections on the consciousness of Jewish bodies: the very meaning(s) of “Jewish” itself.

Think about my experience of the gentleman and his experience of me. When examined closely, both experiences exemplify the following lessons of phenomenology on the conscious apprehension of phenomena: (1) consciousness is capable of self-deception, and (2) consciousness can respond to self-deception.167 The first lesson is explicitly invoked in the example: “I… realize that the black gentleman I mistook…” The second lesson, however, is only implicit. “After all, my prejudices were revealed [past tense]… My initial sight of this man, a man which I certainly believed [past tense] to be Jewish….” The transcription of my narrative makes the implicit second lesson appear available for comprehension, even though its explicit articulation is intentionally moves (mine and the black gentleman’s), while demonstrating virtually opposite modes of judgment constitution, both illustrate the possibilities of different kinds of misreadings informed by prejudice. To see how these modes of judgment constitution affect work in cultural studies premised on social constructivity arguments, see Lewis Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence*, 63-86, esp. 83: “The fallacy involves confusing the conditions of meaning with that which is meant by a particular term or sentence.”

kept out of the narrative. Use of the past tense suggests to my readers that a change has
taken place. The first-person narrator who was convinced of the presence of a black
Jewish gentleman before him has either disappeared or been altered by the experience
and now may or may not believe in the veracity of his initial sight of that man. What
remains apparent but not explicit, therefore, is the fact that certain dimensions of the story
cannot be understood without the meaningfulness of the second lesson. Neither the
“black gentleman I mistook” nor the obstinate visitor who “won’t listen” makes sense in
a world where consciousness is incapable of correcting mistakes or misreadings of any
kind.¹⁶⁸ And if the narrative world of this example were extended such that the story
continued, then the possibilities of my consciousness making mistakes could continue ad
infinitum. Upon seeing a black Jewish congregant at first who turned out to be a
caretaker of the synagogue afterward, nothing would prevent me from continuing to call
the caretaker a Jewish man. I could have chosen to ignore the phenomenological
distinction between the “Jewish” person I initially saw and the “caretaker” before me
afterward. Additionally, I could also have chosen to deny such a distinction could ever
have been made in the first place. Contrary to his own statements about himself, I could
have insisted that the caretaker is a Jew. It seems, then, that reflections on such self-
deceptive phenomena are important for understanding not only Jewish historical and
cultural diversity, but also virtually all meaningful humanistic behavior. How so?

As objects of consciousness, Jews or Jewishness can function in ways much like
the black “Jewish” gentleman I initially saw. At the time, I was entirely capable of

¹⁶⁸ Scheler, Selected Philosophical Essays, 3-5.
acknowledging that a Jewish man was before me, even after I noticed that he did not consider himself Jewish. As agents of consciousness, our unwillingness to clarify the results of our epistemic endeavors is one way we can evade responsibility for what we know. Repeatedly ignoring opportunities to gain a better understanding of phenomena both indicates and reproduces values of evasion. When these values of evasion are misconstrued as objective facts instead of values, per se, then a peculiar form of objectification emerges. This objectification of value is known as the spirit of seriousness.\textsuperscript{169} Values become serious when they are posited as reified objects, like natural “things” that are isolated and exist independently of human choices. When serious positions are held, there is no assertion that one’s consciousness could have responded otherwise. (Think here of the black gentleman’s insistence that he didn’t “know” I was Jewish, despite my clear statements to the contrary.) But the problem of seriousness need not be limited to cases of feigned ignorance. Evading responsibility for our decisions by imposing serious values onto human persons can be a profound impediment to critical inquiry as well.\textsuperscript{170} Particularly in cases traversing unclear distinctions between one’s belief and one’s knowledge, consciousness may act in such a way as to evade responsibility for its historical situation by positing deceptive representations of the self to reflect upon.\textsuperscript{171}


\textsuperscript{170} Simone de Beauvoir, \textit{The Ethics of Ambiguity}, 49.

\textsuperscript{171} Gordon, \textit{Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism}, 11.
Consider the distinction between the following statements: “I believe myself to be a Jew.” / “I know myself to be a Jew.” At first it may appear that first-person consciousness, as presented in the latter statement, is evidently more certain of itself than the consciousness presented in the former statement. But upon further reflection, it is evident that this may not be the case at all. Why, for instance, cannot one be certain of one’s belief? Furthermore, the alleged disparity in certainty implied by the two statements appears to be contingent on the ontological status of Jewish being or whether or not one can really (in the ontological sense) be a Jew. How one knows, defines or understands “Jew” in these statements bears a significant relation to how one may assess them over and against each other. Neither statement is necessarily true for the people who may say them. For instance, it has been customary for various groups of black

172 Ibid.

173 Ibid., 2-3; Gordon, Fanon and the Crisis of European Man, 27-28; Lewis Gordon, Her Majesty’s Other Children: Sketches of Racism from a Neocolonial Age (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 71n27, 128, 136n33.

174 Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, The Colors of Jews: Racial Politics and Radical Diasporism (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2007), 177-178, esp. Gordon’s discussion of how Euro-Jewish communities may appear as Christian in practice to Afro-Jews; this interest in the relationship between Jewish identities and the practical aspects of racial constitution has characterized Gordon’s work since his earliest publications; see Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism, 2-3; For a popular example of metaphorical Jewishness at work in philosophical writing, see Charles Mills, Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1998), 94-95.

175 Gordon, Fanon and the Crisis of European Man, 52-53; also see Alfred Schutz, The Phenomenology of the Social World, trans. George Walsh and Frederick Lehnert (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1967), 118.
people to refer to themselves as the “real” Jews.\textsuperscript{176} Being “real” in such cases is contingent on certain dialectics of racial recognition rooted in the history of colonialism and slavery.\textsuperscript{177} As a result, producing scholarly representations of black Jews as ordinary human beings (and thus ordinary Jews) has proven difficult, particularly when the groups themselves denied that the scholarship accurately portrayed their history and culture.\textsuperscript{178} It was precisely this kind of epistemic ambiguity that fueled the confusion between the synagogue caretaker and me. His (third person) understanding of Jewish history and culture was rooted in what he had learned about the subject through reading texts, while mine was conditioned by my (first person) experience of living as a black American Jew. And we both believed we were correct about the other; and we both were apparently mistaken. The philosophical questions provoked by this experience concern the social-theoretical underpinnings of Jewish studies as a rigorous human science.\textsuperscript{179} Scholars should ask critical questions when conducting research on topics that may easily be


\textsuperscript{177} Jackson, \textit{Real Black}, 115; Gordon, \textit{Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism}, 1-3, 21: the most pressing of these concerns appears to be the question of “whether the blackness of Jews is a source or function of anti-Jewish racism.” Also see Kaye/Kantrowitz, \textit{The Colors of Jews}, 26-30.

\textsuperscript{178} For a good example of this phenomenon, consult James Landing, \textit{Black Judaism: Story of an American Movement} (Durham: Carolina Academic, 2002), xi, esp. where Landing apologizes for presenting ideas about the community that his sources may not believe.

\textsuperscript{179} Gordon, \textit{Fanon and the Crisis of European Man}, 57-58.
misconstrued, misunderstood, or, worse, used for misanthropic purposes.\textsuperscript{180} It is important for researchers to know how to talk about socially exclusive groups of human beings even when, in the framework of scholarship, a perfectly exclusive social world does not formally exist.\textsuperscript{181} If research in the historical and cultural sciences cannot humanely record and articulate the lived experiences of such groups, then one might question the extent to which their work accurately represents the social affairs lived by them.\textsuperscript{182}

Drawing from the work of Franz Brentano, Edmund Husserl taught and maintained that consciousness is always consciousness \textit{of} something.\textsuperscript{183} This idea is known as the intentional theory of consciousness. According to this theory,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{181} Alfred Schutz, \textit{The Phenomenology of the Social World}, 136-138, esp. his discussion of the implications of the relationship between subjective and objective meaning-contents in relation to the theological sciences.
\item \textsuperscript{182} Maurice Natanson, \textit{Phenomenology, Role, and Reason: Essays on the Coherence and Deformation of Social Reality} (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1974), 259-264; Natanson uses the therapeutic aspects of the encounter between a psychiatrist and patient as paradigmatic for the encounter between the human scientist and his or her subjects of study.
\end{itemize}
consciousness is intentional or directional in structure. Yet the intentionality of consciousness does not preclude its potential to posit objects of its own creation. Consciousness can sustain that which it creates. Consciousness can, in other words, imagine, and it can do so chiefly because the directed objects of awareness need not be representations of nature. Emotions, moods, preferences and feelings are all acts of consciousness. One may be aware of them and immediately experience them with no perception of their reference to a correlated object in one’s natural, physical context. 

Likewise, one can be aware of imaginary objects that not only have no referents in nature but also nonetheless do correspond to objects of one’s consciousness. Among such imaginings one may include hobbits, basilisks, golems, unicorns, selves… or Jews.

Constructing or imagining a Jewish self can be a complex enterprise. There are many forces at play, such as individual choices, cultural prejudices and symbolic forces,

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185 Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* (Amherst: Humanity, 1999), 53. Although the theme of sustaining creations of consciousness is not explicitly mentioned here, it is clearly implied, particularly in the discussion on the potential for figures in bad faith to create images that are claimed to be seen.


all of which may in turn be influenced by one’s own agency. But there may also be seemingly predetermined aspects of one’s Jewish self, such as the identity of one’s biological parents. Typically a person does not choose their biological parents, at least not in the sense of imagining or psychically cultivating them to be the source of one’s mitochondrial DNA. Parents usually function instead as a confluence of choices that historically predetermine the possibility of their children’s biological existence. In consequence, we may confess that constructions of a Jewish self, whether one’s own or that of another, involve consciousnesses making images whose origins are (sometimes deceptively) attributable to places both within and without the domain(s) of immediate awareness.

If correct then, the intentional theory of consciousness entails the possibility of a self-referential human awareness. One can, in other words, be aware of one’s Jewish self as located both amidst and beyond immediate apprehension. But if this is the case, then it follows that “one” can also be aware of one’s selves. An individual self, whether Jewish or not, need not be unified in content. Because it can posit imaginary entities such

achievement of a “primordial reflection on the world.” In Gordon’s note on the relevant citation here, he states the following: “It should be noted that this is the ‘orthodox’ view. Although this author is also sympathetic to the unorthodox view, which treats intentions also as intensions, this synopsis holds with either interpretation.”


191 Ibid., 5-6, 8.
as ideal conceptions of “Jews” and/or “Jewish” selves, consciousness itself can play a role in constructing that which appears to be given to consciousness. 192

What has thus far been said of selves applies to identities also, if by the latter one means “an identity-relation between a thing and the property without which a thing cannot be what it ‘is’—that is, a substance.” 193 As far as either selves or identities are concerned, consciousness appears to be elusive. 194 There are public selves, private selves, ideal selves, possible selves, as well as a virtual infinitude of active/reflective selves. Among the latter one may include self-control, self-blame, self-confidence, self-worth, self-esteem and so on. 195 One of the many tasks of phenomenology has been to uncover and learn about the various dimensions of consciousness involved in these forms of self-awareness. 196

Before continuing, it is necessary to draw an initial distinction here between Jewish consciousness and a disembodied Jewish mind-entity. 197 Consciousness, as

192 Ibid., 9.

193 Gordon, Fanon and the Crisis of European Man, 15.

194 Gordon, Bad Faith and Antibleack Racism, 15. This is the condition Sartre labels “metastability.”

195 Mark R. Leary and June Price Tangney, “The Self as an Organizing Construct in the Behavioral and Social Sciences,” in Handbook of Self and Identity, eds. Mark R. Leary and June Price Tangney (New York: The Guilford, 2003), xi, 3-14; see esp. page 7 where the authors attribute the explosion of twentieth and twenty-first century psychological research on the self to the early phenomenological work of William James.

196 Gordon, Bad Faith and Antibleack Racism, 6.

197 Ibid., 35; see in particular Gordon’s criticism of Thomas Nagel’s construal of “identity relations between entities.”
understood here, has a relationship to the mind that does not necessarily manifest the problems associated with Cartesian mind-body dualisms. It does not possess a body in the sense of the body being occupied. It does not have a body. The body is not its property. Rather, the body is its contextualization. Individuals live their bodies as situated selves.  

Gordon describes the existential relationship between consciousness and embodiment in the following manner.  

The body is consciousness in the flesh or consciousness contextualized. It manifests the element of scarcity that makes our choices meaningful as individual choices. Without embodiment, we would simply manifest the anonymous existential choice of being God. Embodiment individuates us into our particular lives and is the matrix of the fundamental choice expressed in particular choices that constitute our life [italics in original].

Consciousness and natural bodies are not, therefore, “things” of independent, entitative status. Instead, they are phenomena in which one is lived through another. Gordon goes on to remind his readers that different bodies may literally exist themselves in different ways, depending on their historical situation. Corpses, for example, are natural bodies, although they’re not living ones. A living body is a manifestation of consciousness, and how such bodies are interpreted or imagined (for instance, as

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198 Ibid., 34.
199 Ibid.
200 Ibid., 30.
201 Ibid., 35.
“Jewish”) by consciousness may or may not involve them being understood as natural.\textsuperscript{202} But consciousness of self, whether that self be one’s Jewishness, one’s embodiment, one’s gender, one’s identity or even an entirely new imaginary configuration of one’s being, presumes a primordial matrix through which such consciousness emerges in the first place.\textsuperscript{203} This matrix, understood as the objective relation between its perspective and other things constituting its limitations, is known as the lived body.\textsuperscript{204} And in its “Jewish” incarnations, such bodies may be understood as “Jewish bodies.”

At first it may appear that the scholarly issue being raised here is limited to the project of making sure different people agree about their world and its signification (i.e.-as “Jewish”) in a disembodied way.\textsuperscript{205} But this assumption is wrong, at least in the case of researching humanities whose historical presence has been mediated by their embodiment. When either racism or uncritical approaches to race inform one’s methods of understanding human consciousness, the issues of scholarly bias in relationship to human biology become much more complex.\textsuperscript{206} To illustrate, imagine a scenario in

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{202} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{203} Ibid., 43-44.
\textsuperscript{204} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{205} Alfred Schutz, \textit{The Phenomenology of the Social World}, 9-10. This is one of Schutz’s criticisms of Max Weber. Schutz claimed Weber did not interrogate the structures of “intersubjective agreement” radically enough to scientifically account for the various levels of meaning-content made manifest in a phenomenology of human behavior, “for what is happening at the present time in sociology is that different schools of thought are each choosing one of these levels of interpretation as a starting point. Each school then develops a methodology suitable to that level and initiates a whole new line of research.”
\textsuperscript{206} Gordon, \textit{Her Majesty’s Other Children}, 136n33.
\end{flushright}
which a particularly definitive “Jewish gene” were discovered. After the discovery, all people everywhere who carried this gene would be considered undeniably Jewish and everyone else would be considered—from a strictly biological perspective—categorically not Jewish. In such a situation, the possible existence of metaphorical Jewishness might have little to contribute to the publicly Jewish community, a community whose Jewishness could only be asserted in accordance with a certain genotype. Given the constraints of this example, one can simply ask the question of whether, for the genetically Jewish Jews in this instance, meaningful assertions of metaphorical identities of Jewishness are possible? If they are possible, then interesting questions could be posed concerning the relationship between genetic knowledge and signifying practices, questions that would necessarily inform one’s understanding of genotypic Jewishness and human reality. If they are not possible, then for what reason would this impossibility necessarily hold for groups outside the genetically Jewish Jews? The basic point here is that even if scholars were presented with a “perfect” paradigm by which to categorize all manifestations of Jewish presence, the actions of human beings would continually produce circumstances, people and realities that transcend the perfection of the paradigm.207 Consciousness, in other words, may manifest itself in ways that contradict its own internal consistencies or self-reflective certainties.208 In such cases, I as consciousness face “a choice over the attitude I shall take toward my being in the

207 Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism, 10-12.

208 Ibid., 12, 13.
world.” Due primarily to the influence of Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre, a great deal of phenomenological research has focused precisely on the problems arising out of this possibility.

Choosing an attitude concerning one’s being-in-the-world demands consciousness of an alternative. This consciousness is constitutive of duration or lived experience. If I am living, therefore, the sense in which I am philosophically aware of my own consciousness may not be the only sense by which my awareness is aware. Likewise, the manner in which I focus on my own Jewishness may simultaneously not be the only manner in which I am aware of being Jewish. I may consider myself a Jewish man, or I may consider myself a Jewish woman. I may even consider myself to be both. Likewise, I may choose to act in the capacity of a phenomenologist this afternoon, or I may choose to go pray at a synagogue this afternoon, or I may do both simultaneously. Regardless of what I choose, the possibility of choice demands the existence of alternatives, and it was the virtual infinitude of alternatives that troubled early phenomenological theorists. In

209 Ibid.

210 Given the standing of Husserl and Sartre in early studies of phenomenology, one can interpret Max Scheler’s *Formalism in Ethics and Non-formal Ethics of Values* and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* as different, competing responses to this problem. See especially Scheler’s formulation of the problem in his essay, “The Idols of Self-Knowledge,” in *Selected Philosophical Essays* (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1973). This is a work Merleau-Ponty consulted and criticized in his early attempts to provide a more rigorous foundation for understanding the phenomenological essence of the relation between images and perception.


his writings, Edmund Husserl responded to the problem of distinguishing between ordinary activities and philosophical activities by insisting on the necessity of a “transcendental ego” in the phenomenological investigation of consciousness.\textsuperscript{213} The transcendental ego was a philosophical orientation a phenomenologist could take toward the “world(s)” of his or her phenomenological investigations. Husserl insisted the transcendental ego was necessary because it alone could do two things, among many others: (1)—meaningfully organize the virtually infinite yet nebulous phenomenological imaginings on the structures of human consciousness, and thereby (2)—analyze what makes human reality in its ever-shifting, contingent dimensions possible.\textsuperscript{214} But for many phenomenologists the transcendental turn was mistaken.\textsuperscript{215} For them, an understanding of human reality accessed by a transcendental ego could become an appropriate theoretical orientation for the human scientist only if it assumed both the positive assertion and also the negation of humanity—even when that humanity was identified as an “ego.”\textsuperscript{216} This, they believed, was a task that rested beyond the capacities


\textsuperscript{214} Ibid., 53-55, 73-80; although Husserl does not use Sartrean terminology, Husserl’s contentions about the transcendental ego’s potential to subject the relation of time, compossibility and active/passive genesis to eidetic laws should make his concern with metastable phenomena evident.


\textsuperscript{216} Ibid., 50-52.
of any kind of ego (including a transcendental “Jewish” one), primarily because there are many ordinary activities in which “I” as a cogito participate while my own first person cogitative sense appears to temporarily fade into non-reflective awareness. In *The Transcendence of the Ego*, Jean-Paul Sartre argues that such experiences call for the phenomenologist to distinguish between what he calls the “I” and the “Me.” The “I” is the first person sense of awareness, while the “me” is the self, understood as an object of reflection. Sartre argues on the basis of what he calls the “pre-reflective” dimension of consciousness that human passion (or “passive” relations to projects of human agency) can nearly completely erode one’s reflective awareness of the first person “I.” Popular words to describe this phenomenon abound: “We just got wrapped up in the process...” “I had no idea we’d been going at it for six hours...” “I simply lost track of time...” “I was in a zone...” When this happens, a virtually ego-less agent can emerge. But the problem identified by Sartre and others is the following: reflection on one’s ego-less


218 Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, 19-20; In such instances, the “I” becomes subject to my own agency. My free acts as such do not disappear, nor does my awareness of my own activity. The sense, however, that there is an explicitly objectified “I” that refers to a stable identity such as my “self” becomes negligible and recedes into the background of my consciousness. As a religious Jew committed to observing Yahweh’s *mitzvot*, my conscious awareness of self may be subsumed by the intensity and dynamism of the task at hand.


220 Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, 60, 93-98.

221 Ibid., 89-91.
agency ontologizes that agency, making it a static object for reflection instead of revealing its active qualities as such. The contradiction, contestation, tension, and fragmentation exhibited by human agency during our self-reflections are what Sartre calls “metastability,” a picture of consciousness that is constantly in flight from itself. The attempt to domesticate metastable consciousness exemplifies what may be called an “ontological fallacy” or a false understanding of the “nature” or “state” of being human. For Sartre and other existential writers, this ontological fallacy characterizes the most fundamental aspect of the human condition.

Throughout his works, Lewis Gordon provides his readers with acute phenomenological descriptions of this condition: that human being is constantly in flight from itself and its various ontological fallacies—that is, assertions of ontologized humanity (be it ontological Jewishness, ontological blackness, ontological womanness, etc.) that involve naturalizing human being as a formal essence or substance.

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222 Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism, 21.

223 Ibid., 15, 21.

224 Although the underlying ideas in the present chapter are fundamentally Fanonian and Gordonian here, I have also drawn on its usage by Victor Anderson’s work. See Victor Anderson, Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism (New York: Continuum, 1995), 11: “Throughout this book, I describe this tendency toward racial reification as ontological blackness. Ontological blackness is a covering term that connotes categorical, essentialist, and representational languages depicting black life and experience.”

225 Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism, 21.

226 Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism, 21; Gordon, An Introduction to Africana Philosophy, 141-143; Gordon, Disciplinary Decadence, 42-43; Gordon, Her Majesty’s Other Children, 44; etc.
Ontological fallacies are not of a single form; they may be expressed in numerous ways. Human scientific research, for example, is not immune from portraying human consciousness as a frozen, thing-like entity. Research can do so in a variety of ways: ressentiment, theology, signification, exoticism, relevance, evidence and genealogy constitute only a few. In order to convey the sense of what is meant by an ontological fallacy, I will summarize these below. They are important for understanding critical analyses of human scientific research, and each one contains a subtle variation of the tendency to ontologize human being.

The ressentiment fallacy, for instance, emerges when theorists and researchers equate criticism with an unyielding negative critique whose purpose exists solely for its own sake. The ressentiment fallacy is indentified by Sartre’s observation in Being and Nothingness that certain human beings live as only a “No” or negation upon the earth. Gordon’s response to the ressentiment fallacy echoes words from Fanon’s Black Skins, White Masks: humanity is also a “yes.” Hence the ressentiment fallacy may be understood as a fallacy of the absolute negation of human possibility. It is an ontological fallacy.

227 Gordon, Fanon and the Crisis of European Man, 22-25; Gordon, Her Majesty’s Other Children, 38.
228 Scheler, Ressentiment, 51-52.
229 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 86-87.
230 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 8; Gordon, Fanon and the Crisis of European Man, 58.
231 Scheler, Ressentiment, 76-78.
The theological fallacy is a crisis of faith in the sense that it is constituted by a fallacious appreciation of the relationship between belief and action.\textsuperscript{232} The theological emerges when theorists and researchers endorse, performatively or otherwise, a formal standard of legitimation for the human being studied.\textsuperscript{233} This standard of legitimation need not be explicitly articulated. It can be implicit by virtue of the theorist acting out or behaving in accordance with a theological grammar premised on a theological dogma. According to Gordon, this means that an overt statement of belief x is not required in order for people who do not publicly subscribe to belief x to behave and act in ways virtually identical to those who do endorse belief x.\textsuperscript{234} Hence the theological fallacy is more than a subscription to dogmas regarding divine beings. It may be also understood as a negation of human possibility by virtue of its dismissal of ordinary norms that do not reflect the investigator’s taken-for-granted standards of legitimation.\textsuperscript{235}

The signification fallacy emerges when theorists and researchers violently impose their language onto others “from the outside.”\textsuperscript{236} By connecting the “forms of color symbolism” such as blackness with modern “cultures of conquest,” historian of religion Charles Long reminds his readers of the violent dimensions of imposing signs and

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{232} Gordon, \textit{Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism}, 146-148, esp. Gordon’s argument about the myths which don’t account for black suffering.
\item\textsuperscript{233} Gordon, \textit{Disciplinary Decadence}, 91-92.
\item\textsuperscript{234} Ibid., 92, esp. his statements about double consciousness.
\item\textsuperscript{235} Gordon, \textit{Her Majesty’s Other Children}, 141.
\item\textsuperscript{236} Gordon, \textit{Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism}, 83.
\end{itemize}
language on “both religion and cultures and peoples throughout the world.” This imposition of language may introduce categories and concepts that are not only inaccurate representations of the human being studied. The new language, embedded as it is in its own historical contests for meaning-establishment, may introduce dynamics of power and intellectual discipline that otherwise may have remained estranged from the cultural contact. Overcoming the signification fallacy thus entails privileging neither the theorists’ language nor the language of the human being studied. Rather, understanding how both evolve in their encounter is critical for a well-rounded understanding of the human realities that emerged in the aftermath of the colonial period(s). Hence the signification fallacy is a negation of human possibility because it uses outsider language to restrict and mask our understanding of the complexity and potential of various human encounters. It is an ontological fallacy.

The exoticizing fallacy emerges when one sadistically depicts human performances as outside the purview of ordinary human behavior. This is not to say avoidance of exoticism demands the “normalization” of all actions. Gordon’s point is that the exoticist refuses to apply the same criteria of ordinariness to others because he


238 Long, Significations, 5.

239 Gordon, Fanon and the Crisis of European Man, 60-61; Long, Significations, 6; Gordon, Her Majesty’s Other Children, 38-39; Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism, 116; Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 11.

240 Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism, 117-118.
embraces a serious, misanthropic form of attachment to them.\textsuperscript{241} As a result, ontological fallacies such as exoticism emerge as negations of human possibility not only because false typifying emerges from the predilections of a researcher’s prejudice but also because the researcher chooses to institutionalize those prejudices by inscribing them into the dominant modes of canon-formation.\textsuperscript{242} Such actions give exoticism its sustained, ontological character; they are the reason why stereotypes of primitive, indigenous people remain so powerful in popular imaginations.\textsuperscript{243} Thus by incorporating prejudiced forms of typified behavior into his or her work, the researcher or theorist may find herself performing an ontological fallacy in the form of exoticism.

The genealogical fallacy emerges as a result of a crisis of “origins.”\textsuperscript{244} It has to do with the inability of theorists and researchers to provide an origin narrative for the human subjects under study. When the origins of a particular person or group are brought into question, those committing a genealogical fallacy will have difficulty attributing mundane, everyday origins to human beings. Preconceptualized metanarratives instead function as the site of origin narratives sustained through time. The relevance, therefore, of a particular person or thing will be predetermined solely on the basis of ascertaining its closeness or distance from the site of an assumed ontology.

\textsuperscript{241} Ibid., 118, 122-123.
\textsuperscript{242} Gordon, \textit{Fanon and the Crisis of European Man}, 22-23, esp. his description of the emergence of the “happy slave.”
\textsuperscript{243} Gordon, \textit{Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism}, 122-123.
\textsuperscript{244} For a detailed explanation and response to the genealogical fallacy, please see chapter 1, Calvin O. Schrag, \textit{Radical Reflection and the Origin of the Human Sciences} (West Lafayette: Purdue University, 1980).
The relevance fallacy emerges when theorists and researchers presume their research constitutes a *permanently* important feature of human knowledge.\(^{245}\) Husserl and Fanon agree that time itself is a critical component for understanding the senses in which one’s theorizing or research can contribute to understanding human reality.\(^{246}\) When researchers assume their works are eternally relevant or at least relevant for all peoples, then researchers ironically prepare others for the emergence of their work’s irrelevance. However, when researchers are explicit about the context for which their work is relevant, they ironically extend the life of relevance in their works.\(^{247}\) Thus the relevance fallacy is about the error of providing a false or nonexistent historical context for one’s research. Because one imposes a formal quality of timelessness (i.e.-eternity) onto the temporal contexts of one’s works, the relevance fallacy may be understood as an ontological fallacy.

Last but not least, the evidentiary fallacy emerges when theorists and researchers refuse to subject their arguments to criticism, particularly if that criticism emerges from

\(^{245}\) Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, 94, 101-103; Schrag, *Radical Reflection and the Origin of the Human Sciences*, 73: “This demand for a reflexivity on the part of the human sciences, admittedly, reminds us of Whitehead’s repeated injunction to avoid the ‘fallacy of misplaced concreteness.’ According to Whitehead this fallacy results when an abstraction, methodological or metaphysical, becomes reified and is considered only in terms of its exemplification of categorical thought… We would prefer, however, to speak of radical anthropology as protophilosophy, given its project of bringing to view the *relevance* of prephilosophical comprehension in the praxis and poetics of everyday life and language.” (italics mine)

\(^{246}\) Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, 103.

\(^{247}\) Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence*, 32-34, esp. the relationship between field-transcending evidence and teleological suspensions of disciplinarity.
perspectives outside their stated disciplinary jurisdictions.\textsuperscript{248} The error of refusing to engage in self-critique is more than an act of hubris. It masks a kind of solipsism, a pernicious form of the objectification of knowledge. In a world where one’s own perspective counts as the only criterion for valid criticism, then the predetermined dictates of one’s own theorizing take on ontological contours.\textsuperscript{249} Hence the evidentiary fallacy requires one imposing a self-constructed truth onto the conditions of veracity already pre-attached to the conclusions of one’s research.\textsuperscript{250}

Although the foregoing instances of ontologization are each outlined by Gordon in various segments of his work, he is clear that they do not exhaust the possible dangers of research in the human sciences. Ontological fallacies regarding human agency occur whenever consciousness is objectified as static and closed. The permutations of ontologized humanity are vast, and their impact can usually be witnessed in many aspects of social life. As Gordon writes,

\begin{quote}
Structures set the conditions for us, but they do not determine what we will do and the meaning of our various projects in life… Appeals to individual natures won’t help in such cases since the observer would need prior cases to establish this instance as part of a series that constitutes a nature. It is a contradiction of terms. An individual nature by definition pertains only to this individual, which means its status as a law of action or identity cannot be advanced beyond itself, and even to itself it becomes limited since
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{248} Ibid., 29.

\textsuperscript{249} Ibid., 32.

\textsuperscript{250} Ibid., 47.
it would have to create such a separation of self from self [italics in original].

Theorizing a particular human “nature” is a paradoxical and somewhat self-defeating enterprise, for at the moment one attempts to theorize an ideal human nature, a distance is created between the (presumably human) theorist and the nature she posits. This happens for a variety of reasons. One reason is that consciousness is embodied, which means that without a body through which to live one’s consciousness, consciousness does not exist. This means that one’s embodiment both poses an epistemic limitation to what one can know about other embodied consciousnesses and potentially offers access to them as public, signifying agents. Another reason theorizing human nature is paradoxical has to do with the time-space location of conscious embodiment. Because living requires traversing a universe of motion, isolating a human nature presumes one can isolate the natural universe serving as the time-space condition out of which such nature can either be differentiated from another or differentiate itself from itself. But because the theorist also inhabits a (different) time-space relation to the natural universe, she herself cannot claim a stable locale from which to identify any particular human nature. A third reason follows from the second: the nature of embodied agency itself. If one understands the natural universe as a structural condition that possibilizes human activity, then one cannot impose the conditions of “nature” on the choices emerging from their


253 Ibid., 57-58.
This is why existential phenomenologists have been known to say that “existence precedes essence.” They recognized that when dealing with agents of consciousness such as human beings, a priori articulations of a human nature could not account for what happens when those a priori, pre-conceived beings “appear.” The appearance necessarily transcends anything that could have been articulated about them a priori. For these reasons, the theorists who begin their reflections on humanity by predefining and positing a human nature—that is, “ontological” humanity, ontological Jewishness, ontological Blackness, etc.—will notice that their efforts are severely limited in the task of engaging human existence. It is an ontological fallacy. Humanity does not correspond to its formulation, nor does human existence become captured or represented by a priori formulations of it. This means that engaging human existence requires addressing the ambiguous situation of human being’s social relation with human being.

What emerges from these considerations is a view of Jewish consciousness qua consciousness as a type of activity that can negotiate its selves into competing

254 Gordon, Disciplinary Decadence, 18.


256 Gordon, Disciplinary Decadence, 18; Gordon, Her Majesty’s Other Children, 75.

257 Ibid., 75.

258 Ibid.
deliberative stances.\textsuperscript{259} It may think what it does not think, feel what it does not feel or believe what it does not believe.\textsuperscript{260} When performed in order to evade responsibility for one’s situation, these contradictory acts of consciousness may be called instances of “bad faith.”\textsuperscript{261} Lewis Gordon’s writings are characterized by an acute sensitivity to the dimensions of human behavior that can be described as acts of bad faith. “In bad faith,” for example, he writes that “I deny my body as mine through convincing myself that my ‘real perspective’ is my perspective beyond my body.”\textsuperscript{262} By this Gordon is not saying that consciousness possesses its body, as though the body were its property. His point is that embodied consciousnesses are living phenomena. Our bodies are the context through which we live our lives. Applied to the topic of Jewish embodiment, we may conclude that it exemplifies bad faith for Jews to invest the reality of their Jewishness in perspectives calling only for special preconditions of their embodiment.\textsuperscript{263} The special preconditions here refer to more than simply a circumcised penis or the claim that one’s mother was Jewish. It refers to any naturalized ontic status.\textsuperscript{264} Such reifications of Jewish embodiment demand that actually embodied Jews conform to a prescription of

\textsuperscript{259} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{260} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{261} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{262} Ibid., 36.
\textsuperscript{263} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{264} Gordon, \textit{Her Majesty’s Other Children}, 136n33, esp. his contention that an argument could be made concerning the ontologically transformative dimensions of conversion, particularly if conversion is the basis for the establishment of racialized constructions of Jewishness.
Jewish presence that lay beyond the actual acts of Jews in the lived dimensions of their lives.\textsuperscript{265} Using one’s body to admit a social world of Jewishness is one thing. Contending that Jewishness is somehow “in” the body, that it is a natural feature “of” the body, is a different matter entirely. Jewishness becomes, in such a contention, ontological. It is real in the sense that a natural, physical object is real. It is not, according to such a notion, an expression of living humanity, and it is incapable of being lived or chosen. It exists as a material without a perspective, onto which consciousness may project an aura of reciprocity. Thus conceived, Jewish consciousnesses may live their identity assignments as though they are natural, ontic forms, and as an ontological fallacy, their “belief” in these forms amounts to acts of bad faith.\textsuperscript{266}

At this point I hope it is clear that I am referring to the problem of racial and sexual ontologization in the constitution of Jewish consciousness. The foregoing reflections on Jewish consciousness and bad faith are exemplified through the structural inequities of ascertaining Jewish racial identity.\textsuperscript{267} Such inequities contribute to the self-alienation of humanity, and when a function of oppression is the alienation of humanity

\textsuperscript{265} Gordon, \textit{Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism}, 17, esp. his statements concerning “sincere” assertions of real selfhood or attempts to “take refuge in a notion of myself as a reified substance.” Gordon’s comments on the relation between the racialized Jewishness of the children of converts to Judaism would apply to this instance (see note 257 above).

\textsuperscript{266} Ibid., 16-18; Gordon refers to this kind of ontologization using the Sartrean language of “facticity.”

\textsuperscript{267} Gordon, \textit{Her Majesty’s Other Children}, 136n33. Among the many different kinds of Jewish race consciousness, one may count the commonly cited belief in matrilineality. From the perspective of a phenomenology of the imagination, however, even appeals to a conversion narrative ultimately refer to a kind of Jewish race consciousness. Despite their status, “converts” (and their children) are nonetheless considered part of the “tribe.”
from itself, then peculiar ontological fallacies can emerge in the study of oppressed human beings. From this point forward, I shall refer to this phenomenon as, simply, “the social problem” of the human sciences. We have already identified ontological Jewishness as the site of at least one such problem. My choice of words comes from W.E.B. Du Bois, who identifies ontological blackness as the site of another. According to him, “[the] social problem” arises when the conceptual tools used to accumulate knowledge about a given domain of human presence seemingly do not work toward the accomplishment of the researcher’s aims. This means that the more research one conducts on a group of people premised upon aims that ultimately place the lived-reality of the people to the background or, worse, the realm of irrelevance, the more distorted they appear in the scholarship, usually due to an ontological assumption that has guided the research. Under these circumstances, scholarship does not perform its stated function. Instead of providing reliable knowledge about people, what it actually provides is no more or less reliable than uncritical knowledges, which presumably are not

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268 Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, 6-11, 57-58.

269 I interpret the Du Boisian “social problem” to be another way of stating what Lewis Gordon calls the “problem of the racist Zeitgeist.” As he states, “there are values associated with having black skin that… may be decoded to reveal dimensions of a fraudulent reality that is nevertheless ‘reality’ and manifests itself as a denial of its own presence, a form of reality, that is, that refuses to speak its name.” See Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, 5.

characterized by the same level of attention to the possibility of error.\footnote{271} According to Du Bois, “[A] social problem is ever a relation between conditions and action, and as conditions and actions vary and change from group to group and time to time from place to place, so social problems change, develop and grow.”\footnote{272} The “Negro Problem,” the “Woman Problem,” the “Jewish Problem,” etc. all stem from a common social situation in the accumulation of human self-knowledge.\footnote{273} For Du Bois, this problem is inevitably present when the paradigms of scientific research cannot accommodate the movements of human being through history.\footnote{274} What Sartre calls the “metastability” (or ever-shifting condition) of consciousness, in other words, seems to render a stable, systematic study of humanity unlikely.\footnote{275} Du Bois, however, raises another possibility. He raises the question of whether, because of human metastability, the actual social problem itself must also be understood as metastable.\footnote{276} If both human consciousness and the social problems arising from attempts to study it may both be understood as metastable, then it


\footnote{273}{Ibid., 3.}

\footnote{274}{W.E.B. Du Bois, \textit{Black Reconstruction in America: 1860-1880} (New York: Atheneum, 1969), 713. This was, it seems, Du Bois’ point in reiterating for his readers that “Herein lies more than mere omission and difference of emphasis” (italics mine).}

\footnote{275}{Gordon, \textit{Fanon and the Crisis of European Man}, 16-18; Gordon, \textit{Bad Faith and Antibleach Racism}, 15.}

is possible to inquire about the extent to which a rigorous study of human reality is itself possible. The works of Du Bois and Gordon seem to converge on this point. They both have offered a way forward in the human sciences by insisting on the study of oppressed populations, particularly in light of oppressed/subaltern populations’ tendencies to shift their perspectives in accordance with the shifting contexts of their oppressors. In short, if human beings are metastable and human researchers of human beings are metastable, the possibility of their metastability being able to correspond raises the possibility of the emergence of a rigorous human science. In *Black Reconstruction in America*, Du Bois addresses the issue in terms of the potential for history to be conducted scientifically:

If history is going to be scientific, if the record of human action is going to be set down with that accuracy and faithfulness of detail which will allow its use as a measuring rod and guidepost for the future of nations, there must be set some standards of ethics in research and interpretation…

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277 Ibid.

278 This issue is explored in depth in the fourth chapter of Lewis Gordon’s *Existentia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000); also see Jane Anna Gordon, “Some Reflections on Challenges Posed to Social Scientific Method by the Study of Race,” in *A Companion to African-American Studies* eds. Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 282-285. Note:- Although this sounds like stabilization, “correspondence” here should not be confused with linear regressions, multiple regressions, correlational coefficients or other measurements of an exact degree of relation between variables. Computations of correlations and the like are functions of rational instruments of predictability, while “correspondence” as used here refers to “speech, understood as a dialogical exchange wrought with risk.” Corresponding, unlike correlating, requires attributing to others a “mode of being that is a function of an inner life” and recognizing in them the possibility of such things as “consciousness, spirit, and faith.” See Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence*, 22, 121, 47.
Here in the United States we have a clear example. It was morally wrong and economically retrogressive to build human slavery in the United States in the eighteenth century. We know that now, perfectly well; and there were many Americans North and South who knew this and said it in the eighteenth century… [But] histories tend to discuss American slavery so impartially, that in the end nobody seems to have done wrong and everybody was right…

Can all this be omitted or half suppressed in a treatise that calls itself scientific?\textsuperscript{279}

The relationship between ethics and rigorous historical writing looms behind Du Bois’ reflections on the possibility of a humanistic science.\textsuperscript{280} On the basis of his study of African Americans’ participation in the Civil War and Reconstruction eras, he argues that human oppression can historically reassert itself in unforeseen, yet politically significant ways.\textsuperscript{281} In contradistinction to a naïve Hegelianism, Du Bois demonstrated that Geist does not necessarily culminate in a superior manifestation of the dialectics of history.\textsuperscript{282}

“What is the object of writing the history of Reconstruction?... [I]t is simply to establish the Truth, on which Right in the future may be built.”\textsuperscript{283} As a scholar and theorist, Du Bois’ concern with (Philosophies of) Right and Truth were not coincidental. As stated by Gordon, “Du Bois thus showed that although history was indeed dialectical, it was not necessarily, as Hegel had argued, a resolving, unfolding dialectic of increased

\textsuperscript{279} Du Bois, \textit{Black Reconstruction in America}, 714-715.


\textsuperscript{281} Du Bois, \textit{Black Reconstruction in America}, 714, 721.

\textsuperscript{282} Gordon, \textit{An Introduction to Africana Philosophy}, 80. Also, see the work of Nahum Chandler and Reiland Rabaka on W.E.B. Du Bois.

\textsuperscript{283} Du Bois, \textit{Black Reconstruction in America}, 725.
freedom.”  

Du Bois also observed that in human beings’ attempts to present idealized versions of history to future generations, problems of oppression plauged not only the scholarship claiming to research accurately a particular episode in history—they also plagued future generations of readers who could not learn from the mistakes of oppressive systems constructed in the past. His recommendations to address this issue, an issue he understood as simultaneously moral and scientific, rested on an approach that dealt with themes familiar to the phenomenologists of his day:

If we are going, in the future, not simply with regard to this one question, but with regard to all social problems, to be able to use human experience for the guidance of mankind [sic], we have got clearly to distinguish between fact and desire.

In the first place, somebody in each era must make clear the facts with utter disregard to his [sic] own wish and desire and belief. What we have got to know, so far as possible, are the things that actually happened in the world. Then with that much clear and open to every reader, the philosopher and the prophet has a chance to interpret these facts; but the historian has no right, posing as scientist, to conceal or distort facts; and until we distinguish between these two functions of the chronicler of human action, we are going to render it easy for a muddled world out of sheer ignorance to make the same mistake ten times over.

One is astonished in the study of history at the recurrence of the idea that evil must be forgotten, distorted, skimmed over…

284 Gordon, An Introduction to Africana Philosophy, 80.


286 Ibid., 722, 725.
Three-fourths of the testimony against the Negro in Reconstruction is on the unsupported evidence of men who hated and despised Negroes and regarded it as loyalty to blood, patriotism to country, and filial tribute to the fathers to lie, steal or kill in order to discredit these black folk. This may be a natural result when a people have been humbled and impoverished and degraded in their own life; but what is inconceivable is that another generation and another group should regard this testimony as scientific truth, when it is contradicted by logic and by fact.\textsuperscript{287}

In his impassioned writings against racially biased conceptions of “scientific truth,” Du Bois was not simply functioning as an advocate of greater black participation and acknowledgment in historical research and scholarship. He was addressing concerns that affected aspects of knowledge acquisition and epistemic reliability that lay far beyond his disciplinary commitments.\textsuperscript{288} He was raising the importance of the social problem for understanding the limits of the human sciences’ potential to account for human reality in both its asserted and denied features.\textsuperscript{289} In the previous quotes, Du Bois insists that historians must take seriously the ethical dimensions of the social problem’s relationship to a historian’s scientific work. This not only means that those purporting to conduct scholarship must state facts and record events while disregarding their “own wish and desire and belief.” It also demands that historians and others who attempt to record human action must do so while privileging the social and political contexts of the eras of

\textsuperscript{287} Ibid.


Therefore, if one lives during a time in which a great deal of prejudice permeates the relationships between a variety of religious or ethnic groups, what makes a scholarly approach scientific has to do with its proponent’s willingness to describe openly the various prejudices infused in such relationships. According to Du Bois, the researcher’s refusal to describe the dominant social and political forms of oppression and prejudice “paints perfect men and noble nations, but it does not tell the truth.” Du Bois recommends for purposes of scholarship an intellectual exercise that is akin to a phenomenological bracketing of one’s cultural prejudices, particularly as they relate to “loyalty to blood, patriotism to country, and filial tribute to the fathers.” But this type of reduction involves more than revealing one’s personal location as a scholar and the dominant social and political context. The prejudices of one’s object of study—that is, the people one includes in one’s research, cannot be immune from this exercise. In short, in order to address the social problem, Du Bois introduces the prospect of a method

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290 Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 726; Du Bois is explicit and somewhat uncompromising on this point. He wrote, “I cannot believe that any unbiased mind, with an ideal of truth and of scientific judgment, can read the plain, authentic facts of our history, during 1860-1880, and come to conclusions essentially different from mine; and yet I stand virtually alone in this interpretation… One fact and one alone explains the attitude of most recent writers toward Reconstruction; they cannot conceive Negroes as men; in their minds the word ‘Negro’ connotes ‘inferiority’ and ‘stupidity’ lightened only by unreasoning gayety and humor. Suppose the slaves of 1860 had been white folk… Ignorance and poverty would easily have been explained by history, and the demand for land and the franchise would have been justified as the birthright of natural freemen.”

291 Ibid., 727.

292 Ibid., 722.

293 Ibid., 725.

294 Ibid., 727.
that does nothing less than map out vectors of oppression and prejudice in the social terrain one studies. If one is researching a set of human relationships in which some human beings contend they are superior to other human beings, then an explicit acknowledgement of that contention is required in one’s description of those relationships.  

Du Bois’ recommendations profoundly reveal why the examination of human consciousness from the standpoint of oppressed people is important. The same issue was addressed by Frantz Fanon when he penned the following words:

As long as the black man [sic] is among his [sic] own, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others. There is of course the moment of “being for others,” of which Hegel speaks, but every ontology is made unattainable in a colonized and civilized society. It would seem that this fact has not been given sufficient attention by those who have discussed the question. In the Weltanschauung of a colonized people there is an impurity, a flaw that outlaws any ontological explanation. Someone may object that this is the case with every individual, but such an objection merely conceals a basic problem. Ontology—once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside—does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some critics will take it on

Ibid., 725-727; Du Bois was so convinced of the necessity for researcher prejudices to be revealed that at the end of Black Reconstruction in America, he divided his bibliographic references into different sections with the following titles: “Standard—Anti-Negro,” “Propaganda (These authors select and used facts and opinions in order to prove that the South was right in Reconstruction, the North vengeful or deceived, and the Negro stupid.),” “Historians (Fair to Indifferent on the Negro),” “Historians (These historians have studied the history of Negroes and write sympathetically about them.),” “Monographs (These authors seek the facts in certain narrow definite fields and in most cases do not ignore the truth as to Negroes.),” etc.
themselves to remind us that this proposition has a converse. I say that this is false.\textsuperscript{296}

Oppressed, subaltern populations, in other words, constantly question their own standpoints, because their perspectives are not assumed to be legitimate by the dominant discourses of their surrounding socio-political contexts.\textsuperscript{297} As seen in the quote above, for Fanon colonial racism comprised one such socio-political context, and its historical presence mandated that theorists and others take the existence of the black man as fundamental to understanding his “being” or ontology. But in order to make fundamental the existence of the black man, researchers should acknowledge the qualities of the socio-political contexts giving rise to that existence. In other words, they must show how the project of creating a “colonized and civilized society” that privileges “\textit{le blanc}” (or “the white”) is, in fact, an ontological project that allows black people as such to remain invisible and hidden from one’s scholarship—even when that scholarship purports to represent black peoples in the name of “\textit{le Noir}” (or “the black.”).\textsuperscript{298} Fanon’s point can is illustrated by his emphasis on the need for \textit{le Noir} to be “in relation to” \textit{le blanc}. The entire point of traditional philosophical discourses on ontology is to establish independent grounds of being. Yet slavery and colonialism demanded the creation and recreation of

\textsuperscript{296} Franz Fanon, \textit{Black Skin, White Masks}, 109-110.


\textsuperscript{298} The dynamics of race and gender made explicit by Fanon’s reference to “the black man” should be obvious here. In scholarship that claims to represent ontologized forms of human presence, an explicit attention to the dominant social & political order may be required for the reader to appreciate the intellectual intent behind a researcher’s writing.
situations wherein one kind of human being, *le Noir*, could not be understood outside of its relation to another kind of human being, *le blanc*. Research from the perspective of oppressed and subaltern populations is thus an interesting position from which to examine human being, particularly if the being of oppressors is assumed to constitute a form of divinity. Because oppressed and subaltern people constantly face the question of their own legitimacy, when they dialectically move from double consciousness to *potentiated double consciousness* or a critique of the false ontologies on which their oppression is built, their reflections take both dominant and non-dominant cultural viewpoints into consideration. Subaltern populations, therefore, can assist the theorist in understanding aspects of human reality that escape scholars who use their own ontological egos as a basis for constructing human knowledge. According to Gordon, the goal of this correspondence between subaltern peoples and theorists would be a rigorous study of human being, provided that the theorist’s reflections start with alienated humanity and that humanity is understood as fundamentally open and contingent, not ontological in nature.

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300 Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, 6-9. The observation on potentiated double consciousness was raised for me by Gordon through correspondence.


302 Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, 16-17, 35.
Du Bois’, Fanon’s, and Gordon’s insights carry affinities with the work of Calvin Schrag.\(^{303}\) All have argued that there remains a great deal of value in the historical and cultural research of human populations whose emergence through history has been denied. Such histories and cultures may not only be communicated despite complicated phenomena such as embodied agency, individuated perspectives, and the metastability of consciousness, this communication should be understood as critically important for understanding the promises and limitations of a scientific approach to studying their reality.\(^{304}\) Schrag insists that phenomenological analyses may contribute to improvements in human scientific research if that “phenomenology itself be subjected to a radical critique, so as to keep it from solidifying into a programmatic of pure theory.”\(^{305}\) When phenomenology, or any other methodological orientation toward human science, becomes a type of pure theory, then it may be used to serve any number of various ontological fallacies. As Schrag states, “the point that requires emphasis is that there is a genesis and development of meaning already at work in the life-world.”\(^{306}\) There is therefore no need to impose new ontologies onto the social meanings functioning as such. Furthermore, these meanings and their operations may be accessed only by attending to the “pre-given knowledge and taken-for-granted meanings already extant in the lived

\(^{303}\) Ibid., 20-21, 37; Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, 30, 32.


\(^{305}\) Calvin O. Schrag, *Radical Reflection and the Human Sciences* (West Lafayette: Purdue University, 1980), 62.

\(^{306}\) Ibid., 63.
social world.”  Schrag refers to the engagement with these meanings as a decision to embrace whatever makes alternative meanings possible.  In short, this is a way of bracketing one’s prejudices about meaning-contents in the social world.  Contrary to simply establishing and reaffirming a concept’s temporal precedence as de facto proof of that concept’s on-going adequacy, accessing an alternative set of meanings in describing a life-world itself constitutes a new “world” of meaning.  This world is not a singular, isolated phenomenon, nor is it a nostalgic call for “lost” meanings, nor is it a reification of nostalgic possibilities.  Rather, its constitution demands the on-going challenge of a “shared project of a community of investigators and interpreters, guided by an interest in the communication of common knowledge concerns.”  Because world-constitution is not a singular affair, it requires a community of interpreters to constantly examine and re-examine the precategorial meanings informing their investigation.  This re-examination and repeated reflection on the world of lived-experiences serves as a protective restraint

307 Ibid., 65.

308 Ibid. “Proceding from such a cognitive attitude, it could be said that the required task of each of the special human sciences is that of a special constitution of world.  Specified worlds, and subworlds within these special worlds, are constituted out of a primordial world of originary experience” (italics mine).  Also see Gordon, Fanon and the Crisis of European Man, 18.

309 Schrag, Radical Reflection and the Human Sciences, 65.

310 Ibid., 66; Gordon endorses Schrag’s call for cooperative intellectual engagement in the human sciences.  At one point, Gordon implies that this notion of sharing is consonant with his conceptualization of objectivity or the “(conscious) understanding of reality” itself.  See Gordon, Disciplinary Decadence, 124; Gordon, Fanon and the Crisis of European Man, 103.
on “the recurring idolatric tendencies on the part of any particular science of man to proffer its world” and thus distort human reality further.311

Although world-constitution involves communication amidst an intersecting plexus of data and information, it is not the case that simply any communication will suffice for addressing common knowledge concerns. “Common knowledge” presumes an agreement on certain assumptions guiding the conversation and discourse. It also presumes the existence of that which serves as the lived context of communication.312 If there is no site for the lived interaction attendant to any such act of scholarly communication, then the world-constituting necessary for the establishment of rigorous hermeneutical paradigms for the understanding and interpretation of human reality will suffer from the fallacy of relevance. This means that the discourses emergent from those barriers to interaction will invariably re-inscribe the social problem and inhibit researchers’ capacity to accumulate and criticize new understandings of human being.313

There are many ways of understanding human beings that live in a social world, but Gordon provides a preliminary framework for identifying the various layers of world-constitution that are important for scholarship. In order to point out the dangers of a pernicious reinscription of the ontological fallacy in humanistic research, Gordon explores the following vectors of social life: (1)- Identity; (2)- Affirmed Alterity; (3)-


312 Ibid., 66-67, 69.

313 Ibid., 73; Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 722; Du Bois, Fanon and Gordon likewise agree on the demand for the lived dimension of the communication of scholarly concerns.
Denied Alterity; and (4) Anonymity. All four of these vectors can be manifestations of bad faith. Because they are alternative modes of meaning-making, they should be understood as possible, not necessary vectors of social action. Social life can be other than how it is depicted through them. However these descriptions are nonetheless useful for identifying how social problems may become exacerbated through the process of analyzing social alienation and social invisibility. Gordon, for example, specifies two types of bad faith: “strong” and “weak.” Strong bad faith refers to acts of bad faith performed by an individual consciousness. Gordon also refers to weak bad faith as “institutional bad faith.”

Institutional bad faith signifies the web of beliefs and artifices that constitute the general spirit of seriousness that enables the individual to hide from his and others’ freedom with great facility; it infects the realms of the social by congealing human reality with a prevailing, institutional condition of unfreedom, of the self-denial and discouragement of freedom.

Institutional bad faith discourages human recognition. It is an effort to construct collectives and norms, “inert” practices that militate against sociality, against human being. Although its goal is the elimination of the human in human being, its route of legitimation may be humanity-in-itself. Institutional bad faith sometimes takes the form, then, of an attack on humanity in the name of humanity. Segregation in the name of order, which in turn

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315 Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence*, 116: “Structural social forces do organize the situations in which we may meet to think, but they do not necessarily determine what we think” (italics in original). Also see Gordon, *Her Majesty’s Other Children*, 73-77.


317 Ibid.
is in the name of the peace, which in turn is in the name of the public good, which in turn is in the name of protecting the innocent, and so on. The appeal is familiar. There is a discouragement of choice through the presentation of ossified values. Slavery, segregation, apartheid, pogroms, and genocide in the name of order can take on cosmological and cosmogonic manifestations—to protect the way things are, which “is” the way things ought to be. In early, existential discourse, we confront the spirit of seriousness, the presentation of values as material, determined features of the world. Ideology, seriality, practico-inertia, variations on this infection of the social sphere are numerous, but in all, they point to the ready-made (presented as “given” tools of evasion).  

In bad faith… we treat social realities as either consequences of nature (and hence not constituted by human beings) or fiction (and hence nonexistence by virtue of being nonphysical). At the heart of bad faith, then, is a denial of agency in the human condition and a denial of the relationship between such agency and the constitution of meaning.

The spirit of seriousness he insists informs this version of bad faith has affinities with the circumstances inspiring Simone De Beauvoir’s call for an adult ethics that embraces both human ambiguity and the responsibility for exercising one’s freedom. Here we shall use Gordon’s language and refer to the “individual” and “institutional” forms of bad faith respectively as “strong” and “weak” incarnations of the vectors of social life below. “Strong” shall refer to “individual” phenomena, while “weak” shall

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318 Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, 22.

319 Gordon, *Her Majesty’s Other Children*, 75.


321 Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, 45; Gordon, *Her Majesty’s Other Children*, 77, esp. his description of ideal types of social worlds to the category of bad faith worlds: “To analyze the world conditioned by all three, which is the focus of this sketch, requires multiple levels of analyses that correlate with the evasive nature of bad faith: One must,
refer to “institutional” phenomena. To examine the possible interchanges of social relationships more closely—that is, individual-to-individual / institutional-to-individual / individual-to-institutional / institutional-to-institutional—I will refer to institutional-to-institutional relations as “macro-institutional” matters and individual-to-group relations and vice-versa as “micro-institutional” ones. The difference between macro-institutional and micro-institutional phenomena is that macro-institutions may be “premised upon human beings as fundamentally open,” in the sense that they embrace nonrational and irrational phenomena “within the general configurative presence of world experience.”

In simple terms, this means macro-institutions are universally inclusive. They can accommodate human experiences in all their multiverse ways, both practiced and possible. Phenomenologically speaking, the horizontal reaches of macro-institutions are identical with the horizontal reaches of the life-world itself. Macro-sociality embraces all possible socialities of lived experience. Micro-institutions and their corresponding micro-socialities have no such requirement. As forms of bad faith, they are sustained by agreement, custom, law, contract and a variety of other means of imposing value on human being.

in other words, analyze a world lived as a world encountered; a world of contingency without accident.”

322 Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, 35; Schrag, *Radical Reflection*, 106. Schrag justifies the need for an expanded horizonal hermeneutic of the life world by insisting that without incorporating the nonrational and irrational components of world experience, “any science or philosophy of man results in a sacrifice of adequacy in accounting for the texture and dynamics of lived experience.”


324 Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, 22.
“Identity,” the first of Gordon’s vectors of social relation, has been addressed above. It may be understood as an imagined equivalence between a subject position and one’s embodied agency. A strong identity is an individualized consciousness that has ontologized its chosen identity-assignment. As a result, strong identities substantiate the world’s values concerning the self by ossifying particular self-notions in reference to themselves. An example of a strong identification is the statement: “I [am personally, in my own mind, certain that I really, really] am Jewish.” Or, in the same respect, “I [without a doubt, am incapable of being wrong that I] am American.” A key component of a strong identity is its ossification of preferred values through the presentation of their equivalence with a stable location. The person with a strong identity not only chooses their identity. They suggest that their “choice” was the only option available. In the examples above, it is not only that the speakers assert their Jewishness and Americanness. They also imply that their only choice was to be Jewish and American. It is this collapse of options into a single choice that informs the certainty of one’s strong identity. Alternative renderings could therefore be the following: “I must be Jewish [because I cannot live any other way],” or that “I have to be American [because that is my true essence].” Hence strong identities are forms of self-ontologized self-awareness. They are ontological fallacies.

325 Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism, 9, 53-55. Although Gordon considers ontological identity constructions as acts of bad faith, he does not do so with respect to all such constructions. See Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism, p.151-153, esp. his discussion of ethics in an antiblack world and Fanon and the Crisis of European Man, 15, 29.

326 Gordon, Fanon and the Crisis of European Man, 22-23; Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism, 8-9.
A weak identity may be understood as an individual consciousness that has used situations of serious recognition or “group identification” to evade the self-explicit ontologization of value characteristic of strong identities. Examples of weak identifications would be the following statements: “I am a Negro [because that is what others call me].” Or, “I am a Jew [because my parents have a Ketubah].” Or, “I am a woman [because my birth certificate says I was born female].” Or, “I am a Jew [because my mother’s Rabbi says she is a Jew].” Or, “I am a Jew [because I converted through an Orthodox beit-din].” In these statements, the causal relation indicated by the term “because” is actually a closed form of sufficiency that hides the speaker’s active participation in identity constitution. A more accurate rendering of the first statement, for example, could be “I am a Negro [because and solely sufficiently because that is what others call me].” Although both strong and weak identities are chosen, weak identification is an evasion of the self-aware decision-making that is characteristic of strong identification.327 Also, it is important to remember that multiple acts of consciousness may be simultaneously enacted by the same utterance from an individual. Assertions of a strong and weak identity are not mutually exclusive phenomena, but they are both examples of ontological fallacies.

“Affirmed alterity” (or “affirmation,” for short) may be thought of as instances in which embodied agents are posited as being in agreement that their agency converges in a particular social location, institutional identity or group subject position.328 It is

327 Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism, 47, esp. his description of the white umpire’s denial of responsibility for the exclusion of blacks from baseball.

328 Ibid., 6.
important to note that “alterity,” for Gordon, simply means otherness, without an assumption of the power of one’s self over another.\(^\text{329}\) Thus it is a typical feature of mundane human life.\(^\text{330}\) Mundane, ordinary human beings have a constant awareness of others, both known and unknown. Consequently, it is outside of ordinary human experience for one to know completely all there is to know about others. Such knowledge would be extraordinary and, in effect, a theological claim.\(^\text{331}\) But ordinary human relations are not theological ones. They involve things that are both socially known and unknown. Ordinary affirmation is an incomplete knowledge of this kind. As we will see, it embraces anonymity. It claims to know some things, but not all things about others.\(^\text{332}\) For example, if three different persons each claim to be Jewish, they can be said to be in an affirmed alteritous relation if all three, regardless of whatever else they know about each other, apply this claim of Jewishness both to their individual selves as well as the other two parties. However, an ordinary affirmation would mean that these three persons would also assume that each one’s agreed affirmation of the others’ Jewishness could never constitute total knowledge of any of the others. This partial, incomplete type of knowledge is characteristic of ordinary affirmed alterity. Examples of affirmation abound in the mundane world. Citizens of countries acknowledge their

\(^{329}\) Gordon, *Her Majesty’s Other Children*, 125; Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, 48-49.

\(^{330}\) Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, 42-43.

\(^{331}\) Ibid., 20, 23.

\(^{332}\) Ibid., 43.
fellow country folk; members of social clubs acknowledge other members; members of ethnic groups engage in coethnic recognition, and so on.

Strong affirmed alterity (or “strong affirmation”) is an individual’s bad faith evasion of their own freedom by strongly identifying another individual or group with one’s own individual identity: “Those black people also recite the Shema; they must have learned it by listening to me.” Or, “I saw that woman wearing a Star of David; [I am absolutely certain that] she is Jewish like me!” Or, “Sephardim are awesome; [I am certain that] they are my kind of people.”

The fact that a macro-institutional reality may include various competing micro-institutional groups may be of little consequence to those espousing a micro-institutional form of strong affirmation. What matters is that a strong affirmation of one’s identification with a micro-institutional group is asserted, regardless of the ways various micro-institutional groups may affirm or deny each other. Because strong affirmation need not invoke the issues regarding micro-institutional group affirmation or denial, more immediate concerns regarding the individual’s relationship to a given micro-institutional identity may come to the fore. This is so particularly in cases where either/or institutional commitments are publicly demanded from individuals: “Are you with us or against us?” Or, “No, no, no!... You can’t be Jewish and black at the same time!” Or, “You need to tell me! Are you a Jewish black or black Jew?” As we can see, strong affirmations can take place in order to respond to public denials of options. At their root such appeals are requests to ontologize micro-institutional prejudices through

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333 Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism, 6, 20.
affirming them. But ironically, when a group demands a strong affirmation from someone, its explicit appeal can actually be an implicit request for that person’s weak affirmation of the group (see below). When the refusal to affirm a group becomes too dangerous a practice to risk, yet the individual’s desire for macro-institutional sociality remains, an interesting phenomenon may take place. The individual’s profession of macro-institutional sociality may remain hidden, while they nonetheless affirm a particular micro-institutional group as their primary group identification. In this way, strong affirmations may actually constitute nothing less than a weak identification (see above). An example of this phenomenon would be the following: a rabbi stops a black man from entering a synagogue. The young man resists, insisting that he is a Jew according to halakha. The rabbi incredulously asks the young man, “So you say that you’re born Jewish, eh?” The young man responds with a smile, “Of course I was, sir,” as he hands the rabbi papers that seemingly verify his narrative. “See,” he says, “I have proof that I am a Jew!” Noticing how strong and weak affirmations coincide is useful for understanding the “imposition of extraordinary conditions of the ordinary upon individuals in the course of their effort to live ‘ordinary’ lives.” When “extraordinary conditions” take hold, strong affirmations may also turn out to be weak identifications and strong denials. Choosing a group identity, therefore, can be a simultaneous effort to (1) identify one’s own group, (2) uncritically assent to its institutionalized conventions

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334 Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, 22.

335 Ibid., 41.
and (3)- deceptively deny one’s relation to other groups. \textsuperscript{336} In each case, the individual may flee from taking responsibility for her ordinariness and instead consent to the extraordinary pressures to conform. If the institutions through which the individual navigates are premised on limiting life options for their participants, then those institutions will not experience any resistance from our individual. She will deem it sufficient that her identity is one, even if it is evident that it is not. The strong affirmation, therefore, can mark the beginning of profound negations of human possibility. It is an ontological fallacy.

A weakly affirmed alterity (or “weak affirmation”) may be understood as a bad faith identification with institutional structures that pose challenges to freedom. \textsuperscript{337} Interestingly, a weak affirmation endorses these challenges by limiting its functions to that which is solely in accordance with institutional conventions. Thus weak affirmation may not only be found amongst those individuals who seriously transform institutionally sanctioned values into facts. It can also exist among micro-institutional groups practicing conventional forms of segregation. For example, imagine two groups of Jews, one Sephardic and another Ashkenazic, who affirm each other’s Jewishness but refuse to pray together, because they have institutionalized differences concerning Jewish liturgy. Is this really a case of bad faith? For many responders to this scenario, the contradiction

\textsuperscript{336} Gordon, \textit{Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism}, 6; Gordon, \textit{Her Majesty’s Other Children}, 15, esp. his own statements about how identities can be used to resist the sorts of ontologizing due to statizations of selfhood.

\textsuperscript{337} Gordon, \textit{Fanon and the Crisis of European Man}, 22; Gordon, \textit{Her Majesty’s Other Children}, 145: although he does not use my terminology, one of Gordon’s criticism of certain trends in African philosophy is that it is a manifestation of weak affirmation as we have described it here.
appears obvious: a refusal to integrate with other groups that one “affirms” constitutes a performative contradiction of one’s “affirmation” of the other group. Although such a response may initially sound reasonable, a critic might direct our responder to the stated source of the groups’ refusal to pray together.

“It is not that the separation between the Sephardic and Ashkenazic groups is a manifestation of bad faith,” says our critic, “it could be that their disagreements about liturgy are actually held in good faith.”

“True,” our responder might say, “but what does that say about the people having the disagreement?”

Our responder’s point is that if one grants the possibility of exercising traditions, rituals and other conventional behaviors in good faith, then one must grant the possibility of also maintaining non-conventional traditions and rituals in good faith. During weak affirmation, people and groups use their acknowledged relation to other groups in order to hide or deny the evidence that it is they and their groups who have chosen to affirm the other groups. Weak affirmation relies on the prejudice that some groups “naturally” belong together. It resists confessing that social reality is an achievement. In the case of the Sephardic and Ashkenazic groups above, it was never preordained that they acknowledge each other’s Jewish existence, and it is certainly not the case that conventional responses to situations force persons in those situations to decide one way or the other. Although it is true that conventional behaviors exist, it is not the case that their existence predetermines what those who reflect on those conventions will do. The lesson of weak affirmation is therefore straightforward: individuals and groups choose
what institutions to affirm. A decision to embrace a weak affirmation is a decision to place a limit on human agency. It is a decision to embrace an ontological fallacy.

“Denied alterity” may be characterized as the opposite of affirmative group identification. It occurs when embodied agents are not posited as being in agreement that their agency converges in an identical group identity or institutional subject position.\(^{338}\) For example, if three different persons each claim to be Jewish, but two of the three agree that the third person is not Jewish, then those two exist in a relation of denied alterity to the third party. It should be emphasized, however, that the two parties’ denial of an alterituous relation to the third neither demands the third party deny their alteritous relation to it nor forbids its existence in an affirmed alteritous relation to the other two. In fact, persons who find themselves to be the stigmata of denied alterity may very well exist in an affirmed alteritous relation to the very others who deny them. These are persons Gordon refers to as “Her Majesty’s other children.”\(^{339}\) In cases such as Her Majesty’s other children, the “other children” may understand their deniers as relatives and sometimes ancestors in an extended macro-institutional family, at least with respect to the relevant estranged group identifications.\(^{340}\)

Strong denied alterity (or “strong denial”) may be considered a kind of bad faith that demands a distancing of one’s self from others, given that those others represent an undesired alternate reality (or “underside”) behind one’s micro-institutional commitments


\(^{339}\) Gordon, *Her Majesty’s Other Children*, 5.

\(^{340}\) Ibid., 5-8.
An example of strong denial would be the statement: “Those blacks [I am personally, in my own mind, certain] are not Jewish like me [because I am certain that Jews are white].” Or, in the same respect, “Those whites who call themselves ‘Ashkenazi’ are not real Jews like me [because I am certain that so-called Negroes are the real Jews].”

Weak denied alterity (or “weak denial”) may be understood as a public form of micro-institutional bad faith. The reason weak denials of consciousness are public has to do with the tendency of weak denials to emerge from situations involving one’s possible estrangement from one’s avowed micro-institution. In other words, weak denials tend to be made in contexts where there is possible confusion about one’s actual group identification. An example of weak denial would be the statement: “Those [blacks] are not Jews [because my rabbi said he did not know of any black Jews who live around here.]” Or alternatively, “I do not accept those [black people] as Jews [because they are a different group of people].”

At this point we may explore the concept of anonymity. Anonymity means to be “nameless.” In the context of anonymity, another’s identity is not known. The potential ignorance an individual or group may have toward the anonymous person or

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341 Ibid., 5, 53-55, 124-125.

342 Ibid., 53-55; Consider Gordon’s discussion of mixed race identities as a manifestation of bad faith. His depiction of mixed race identity as bad faith exemplifies a vector of weak denial; Ibid., 60-61: “Individuals who are a mixture of white and black find themselves in more than a construction of mixture in and of itself. They find themselves facing a mixture of clearly unequal term… The conclusion is devastating: One is more of a human being to the extent to which one is less black.”

343 Gordon, Fanon and the Crisis of European Man, 43.
group presents the theorist of social reality with the complexities of appreciating how nominal ignorance can affect social relations. For some groups and persons, encounters with anonymous beings demands an assumption of denied alterity, until such assumptions are proven demonstrably inadequate by the behavior of the anonymous and/or the non-anonymous. For other groups and persons, encounters with anonymous beings demands an assumption of affirmed alterity, until such assumptions are likewise disproven by the anonymous. Contested identities, such as those characterized by different groups of peoples exhibiting affirmative and denied alteritous relations to each other, may have different responses to anonymous beings, with arbitrary criteria being appealed to for purposes of establishing inter- and intra-group harmony.

The contestation of identity positively raises the question of the possibility of resisting anonymity. Resistance to social alienation based on anonymity comes from a desire for “typical” anonymity (as opposed to “perverted” anonymity.) Typical anonymity is found in the liminal realm of human sociality. “Liminality” here means a limitation to what one can know about others. The decision to flee typical anonymity is an incubation of socio-epistemic possibility; an anonymous person desiring to be known may struggle, fight, doubt, contest, fragment, regroup and otherwise amorphously develop until she, at last, establishes herself as constitutive of a social ontology that is

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344 Ibid.

345 Gordon, *Her Majesty’s Other Children*, 5-7; Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, 47-50, 58.

346 Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, 43, 66.
characterized by various social roles. Once named by others, the anonymous is transformed into other modes of sociality characterized by alterity and identification, modes identifiable from the subject positions Sartre calls the “us” and the “we.” Where consciousness endures in relation to consciousness, anonymity loses its grip. Typical anonymity, therefore, is built on the possibility of maintaining liminal modes of social becoming.

But what happens if social alienation is ontologized in such a way that liminal modes of social becoming are deemed impossible? What if human consciousness is deemed irredeemably neither Other nor Self? The postcolonial phenomenologies of Fanon and Gordon are concerned with precisely these questions. According to them, if the liminal mode of sociality is removed from human history, then the possibility of the socially alienated subalterns regaining a typical place of anonymity and otherness/alterity will emerge only with the reintroduction of this liminal mode into human relations. Efforts to establish and maintain the removal of others from the possibilities of being typically anonymous produces what Gordon calls “theodicean” modes of human relatedness. The reference to divinities is apt, in part, because it emphasizes the chasm between the gods and human beings. Gods are, after all, infinitely more powerful than human beings, and human beings sometimes find themselves questioning the will of the

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Likewise, when the liminal mode of sociality is absent from human relations, socially alienated persons cannot appeal to the assumptions of typical anonymity in order to address social problems. Those subaltern persons inhabiting the theodicean mode are deemed neither Other nor Self in a theological project not of their own making. They are a manifestly Fanonian “subaltern” form of anonymous being.  

Strong anonymity may be characterized as an individualized consciousness that desires, in a perverse way, not to be visible to others. It may be driven by the fear that, if seen, one’s consciousness will be identified as a threat or danger. It may also be the result of an individual wanting others to feel endangered or threatened, particularly in the sadistic manners spoken of by Sartre. In any case, to desire ordinary anonymity means consciousness cherishes the liminal context of being unknown (or being known in a typical way). But as a form of perverted anonymity, strong anonymity makes it easy for extraordinary interpretations of consciousness to emerge. In perverted anonymity, things become what they are based on what they are not, and they become what they are not based on what they are. The black is


354 Natanson, *Phenomenology, Role, and Reason*, 167-168;

355 Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, 17.

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invisible because of how the black is “seen.” The black is not heard because of how the black is “heard.” The black is not felt because of how the black “feels.” For the black, there is the perversity of “seen invisibility,” a form of “absent presence.”

Contradictions such as “seen invisibility” and “absent presence” are possible because of bad faith. Strong anonymous persons, therefore, desire to be seen, heard and felt in ways that forbid their inner lives from being truly seen. Think here of the old African American saying, “I got one mind for the White man to see… and I got another that I know is me!” In this saying, the “mind” that is available for White comprehension is clearly an intentional distortion of the inner life of the black person subscribing to this old dictum. Yet the decision to close the “White man” off from access to their inner lives can be a decision ridden with bad faith. In addition to shielding blacks from the trauma of racism, such a decision can also be an attempt to use white racism as a rationale for black evasion of responsibility. The responsibilities evaded by strong anonymity are nothing less than the adult sensibilities of honest dialogue and the risk-laden coordination of human affairs in the effort to solve social problems. But by closing off dialogue, by not articulating what one truly sees, hears and feels, cooperative attempts to solve social problems will stand at a nadir. Strong anonymity, therefore, stands as an imposed limitation on human agency. It, too, is an ontological fallacy.

Weak anonymity, like weak denial, may be understood as an institutional form of bad faith. It entails the possibility that others can interrogate one’s institutionalized assumptions: “Who do you represent?” Or, “Whose purposes are you really serving?”

This is an ironic posture and suggests that a pernicious deception may be at work. Interrogations of one’s group suggests that typical anonymity may not be the actual stance a person or group can take with respect to the interrogators. It is ironic because the question of allegiance itself constitutes evidence that the interrogators themselves do not desire a typically anonymous relation to one’s group. In some cases, the perverse anonymity that arises does so in competition with the possibility that affirmed alterity will weaken one’s own group identity. For example, consider one’s response to the question, “Are you with us or against us?” A reasonable person could very well be in an affirmed alteritous relation with the “us” in this question while simultaneously being in an affirmed alteritous relation with those considered to be “against us.” But if phrased as an either/or, our “reasonable” person could hide a great deal of their personal affirmations by deciding to only reveal their affirmation of the interrogators (and thus remaining anonymous to them, but only “weakly.”) Persons who exhibit weak anonymity, therefore, may do so because the social groups of their belonging have, in fact, started to lose cohesion. By hiding the complexity of affirmations and denials embedded in ordinary forms of ignorance of others, persons embracing weak anonymity close off the possibilities of honest engagement and dialogue. In such cases, weak anonymity proves itself to be a manifestation of ontological fallacies.

Having come to the end of our immediate overview of Gordon’s vectors of social relations, I would like to clarify two considerations at this point. First, that “world-constitution” as I have been describing it, requires an acute attention to the social

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world—that is, details of how various parties construct social realities through their responses to not only others they recognize, but also the anonymous, literally “nameless” masses that constitute the bulk of their encounters with others in most ordinarily human social worlds.\textsuperscript{358} And second, the interaction between theorist / researcher and the human being(s) she studies constitutes one such instance of a given social world.\textsuperscript{359} For example, racial designations can have a profound impact on the methods and results of social scientific research. Given that different groups of racialized Jews define “other Jews” differently, how the various groups of racialized Jews studied define the relation of identical, affirmed, denied or anonymous alterity to that of the researcher may make a huge difference in the quality and quantity of information available to the researcher. In simple terms, there is no guarantee that black people who are the subjects of a given study will grant to white researchers the same information they might yield to black researchers. Likewise, it is not certain black Jews will grant the same information and data to other Jews who are not black. Even if white researchers are granted access to fairly reliable information, it still may be the case that the willingness of black Jews to assist that researcher in “correctly” sifting, sorting, and interpreting that information for a largely anonymous, consuming public could be severely compromised by a white researcher’s alterity status, whether affirmed, denied or otherwise.\textsuperscript{360} These are not small

\footnote{\textsuperscript{358} Gordon, \textit{Her Majesty’s Other Children}, 13-14.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{359} Gordon, \textit{Fanon and the Crisis of European Man}, 86-87.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{360} See Jane Anna Gordon, “Some Reflections on Challenges Posed to Social Scientific Method by the Study of Race,” 279-302; Gordon, \textit{Her Majesty’s Other Children}, 128; also see Gordon and Gordon, \textit{Of Divine Warning}, 51-52.}
methodological hurdles to be overcome. Yet for purposes of decolonizing human scientific methods, Gordon offers two initial suggestions for the two considerations clarified above: first, theorists of human reality must strive to correspond with the human being(s) they study, and second, because human theorists of human reality correspond with their human subjects of research, researchers in the human sciences should never strive to embrace perverted forms of anonymity.\footnote{Gordon, \textit{Fanon and the Crisis of European Man}, 47, 86-87.} Similar conclusions have been reached and scrutinized by other feminist epistemologists.\footnote{See \textit{Feminist Epistemologies}, eds. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York:Routledge, 1993).}

Gordon argues that anonymity is a necessary condition for the ordinary. It is thus vital for research. But what perverted anonymity does is to create extraordinary conditions for ordinary behavior, which distorts the subject of study. Because the investigative posture of perverted anonymity facilitates the insertion of hidden prejudices and concealed choices into one’s research, the more researchers embrace perverted forms of anonymity, the more likely it will be that their commitment to scholarly rigor is compromised. In the words of Gordon, “the revelation of concealed choices is a strike against bad faith.”\footnote{Ibid., 19.} If those choices involve the very ontic nature of the social world grounding the common knowledge concerns of one’s research (as is the case in studies involving the contested meaning(s) of Jews / Judaism), then it becomes all the more important for theorists and researchers to critically articulate how they are embedded in the web of denied and alteritous social relations that are constitutive of the social world.
presumably being engaged in their investigation. Confessing how one is embedded in a social world not only requires being receptive to how others locate and understand one’s subject position in relationship to them. It entails an act of communication. It communicates to others that structural inequities such as sexism and racism are important matters of concern for the person studying the lives of oppressed peoples. The reason this amounts to a researcher’s admission of the educational value of oppressed people’s perspectives is found in an insight penned by Gordon. According to him,

Typical anonymity is marked by epistemological limitations on the relationship between self and Other… [But] racism renders the individual anonymous even to himself. The very standpoint of consciousness, embodiment itself, is saturated with a strangeness that either locks the individual into the mechanism of things or sends him away and transforms him into an observer hovering over that very thing. Thus, to be seen in a racist way is an ironic way of not being seen through being seen. It is to be seen with overdetermined anonymity, which amounts, in effect, to invisibility… “Look, a Negro!” identifies, points out, but does not inquire beyond the sphere of limited points of subjectivity. The Negro—who is typically any Negro—is irrelevant to his own characterization. All is known. Enough has been said. And like his identifiers, the Negro finds himself facing the objective alienation of his embodiment out there [italics in original].

If “all is known” and “enough has been said” about black people, then there is no need for further inquiry. But the refusal to inquire further suggests that a perniciously ontological fallacy may lie underneath one’s work. Ironically, the only way to then move

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364 Ibid., 87; also see Gordon, “Some Reflections on Challenges Posed to Social Scientific Method by the Study of Race,” 286.

forward on the *question* of ontological humanity is to inquire further. The convergence with Du Bois’ approaches to humanistic science should be obvious here. Because Du Bois and Fanon are both concerned with theorizing the relationship between oppression and the social problem, one sees in the writings of Gordon at least two areas in which there is a convergence of thought on the issue of language. First there is the issue of communication between theorist and reader.\(^{366}\) Because the phenomenon of communication presumes both its limitation and the reinscription of this limitation in new social contexts, communication itself is premised on the possibility of the social problem.\(^{367}\) This is why Fanon, for example, is interested in addressing the human condition by questioning the legitimacy of the presumed impossibility of addressing the social problem. The phenomenon of communication alone suggests that, even if considered intractable in the human study of human reality, the social problem is clearly not insurmountable by human beings.\(^{368}\) Because of people’s potential to use the human sciences as tools to address the various social problems emergent from the historical effects of racism and colonialism, it is clear that there is an ethical dimension of this theorizing effort. A good theory is assumed to be a non-racist one. But Gordon insists that the ethic of dismantling the social problem is not the only important consideration in this regard. Both he and Fanon, for instance, demonstrate that the ability to teach others

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\(^{368}\) Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, 64-66; in the case of Fanon’s analysis, Gordon emphasizes the communicative aspects of transforming the meaning-contents of phenomena embedded in the colonial “everyday.”
how to dismantle the social problem is as equally important, if not more important, than theorizing the possibility of its dismantling alone.\(^{369}\) In short, the ethical demands of decolonization raise the critical importance of political considerations.

Gordon’s political theory is intimately bound to his theory of speech. For both he and Fanon, an anti-racist hermeneutic demands successful acts of communication between theorists and readers, and this means their politics are concerned with understanding the particular role(s) of language use in the encounter with the social problem.\(^{370}\) The communication between readers and theorists, therefore, raises a second issue: how language is actually lived by human beings in the context of various oppressions. We have already seen in our review of Gordon’s analyses of social vectors, that identical language can be understood in a slew of different ways. This phenomenon of coextensivity is even more pronounced in cases of oppression. When, as a result of institutionalized oppression, oppressed people and their oppressors use similar discourses to describe what may or may not be similar social realities, it becomes important for students of human reality to convey the basic senses of meaning being engaged by both groups of peoples.\(^{371}\) If this is not done, confusion may arise about the meaning of basic

\(^{369}\) Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence*, 13-17, esp. his insistence on page 17 that teaching others how to address the social problem entails teaching them how to see the relationship between truth, evidence, political realities and the human condition.

\(^{370}\) Gordon, *Her Majesty’s Other Children*, 39-41; also see *Disciplinary Decadence*, 23-24. I interpret the latter’s discussion of ancient cities and warfare as a metaphor for, among other things, understanding methods of humanistic research that involves the “insider/outsider” dilemma and its relation to issues of language and communication; also see Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, 57-66.

ideas being referenced by various persons being studied, and this confusion can undermine the effectiveness of politically collaborative efforts. In response to this problem, both Gordon and Fanon recommend that language be considered a critical aspect of reducing the social problems that may potentially be reinscribed through one’s research.  

One way of approaching Gordon’s theory of language is to begin with Frantz Fanon’s insight that ontological blackness is fused with the material reality of an epidermal schema in the everyday world. When ontological humanity, whether in the form of Jewishness or blackness or womanness, becomes identified with a marker of embodiment, then the physicality of that embodiment takes on a new and particular relationship to efforts at ontologizing human reality. At such a juncture, the project of ontologization can bear a rhetorical force as convincing as any logically valid proposition. It is the serious features of this ontologizing project that Fanon problematizes, and he does this by emphasizing the power of the epidermal schema to convince its adherents of the “reality” of their viewpoints. Bracketing this reality is something that could be critical for a liberating political project, and as a result, the “epidermal schema” to which Fanon refers need not apply only to skin color.

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372 Ibid., 40.
373 Ibid., 36.
374 Ibid., 38.
375 Ibid.
376 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 93, esp. his invocation of Sartre’s anti-Semite as exemplary of a “racist who creates his inferior.”
Epidermal schemas may be witnessed by observing the mundane, everyday ways such schemas may be used to differentiate human beings into ontological constructions such as “women”/“men” or “female”/“male.” Eye color, hair color, height, weight, physical disability and a series of other characteristics may be appealed to as evidence of the objectivity of these schematics.\(^{377}\)

At this point, however, the theorist of human reality may encounter an interesting convergence of social processes. The world of the everyday is actually a complex, dynamic plethora of phenomena. Its multiagency and multiversity is far beyond what the ontologist of humanity can posit as human possibility—especially with respect to the racial subalterns theorized as non-normatively human.\(^{378}\) Depictions of normative human being must solicit “help,” therefore, in order to achieve the desired epistemic veracity. This help, according to Gordon, partially comes in the form of people’s bad faith beliefs in ontological humanity.\(^{379}\) So in contradistinction to theorists who insist that racism emerges in response to people’s belief in races, Gordon argues that the reverse is equally as likely—that people’s sincere belief in races can emerge in response to the presence of racism: \(^{380}\)

\(^{377}\) Ibid., 157, 162-165. Fanon is explicit about the phenomenological dimensions of the distinctions he draws between Negroes and Jews. That both are subject to epidermal schemas are obvious. Fanon’s point is that for people who are locked into the confines of an epidermal schema, a bio-genetic ontology emerges.

\(^{378}\) Gordon, *Her Majesty’s Other Children*, 37.

\(^{379}\) Ibid.

\(^{380}\) Ibid., 36.
The police officer follows the black, because the black has crossed his path. The white woman fears rape, because the black is close enough to touch her, if he tried. The black is unqualified because a white wanted that job. The black is unintelligent because, as Kant once observed, he or she is black and, therefore, anything coming forth from such a mouth must be utterly stupid. “Research” emerges that explores black propensities for violence, laziness, idiocy, and pathological sex—lots of pathological sex. The black thus becomes the material manifestation of pathology, and mythopoetical “facts” of blackness emerge that run counter to the lived-reality, the lived-experience, of the black.381

In giving these examples, Gordon’s point has been to emphasize how easy it is for people who live out the dictates of the social problem to confirm its “truth,” despite the ordinary actions of the human beings ontologized therein. Note how in each example listed, neither general nor individual behaviors of black folk were necessary for the onset of antiblack attitudes and behaviors. In such instances, the actual lived-experiences of the vast majority of people signified as “black” are marginalized in importance. Whether they actually conform to their representation through such acts is of little consequence. Hence it is not the cooperation of ontologized human beings that is needed for the onset of the social problem. Rather, the employment of antiblack, antiJewish, antiwoman or any other anti-ontologized-humanity attitudes in the affairs of daily life alone (without ontologized humanity’s “help”) can create the historical conditions for the transformation of humane institutions into ones exemplifying the social problem.382 With respect to the feminist study of Jews and Judaism, Ann Pellegrini articulates the scope of the problem.

381 Ibid., 43.

382 Ibid., 42.
The displacement of Jewish women from the scene of Jewishness seems to me an unfortunate and frequent side effect of some pathbreaking studies of race, gender and Jewishness. It is not, I want to make clear, the focus on Jewish masculinity that I find troubling. After all, not historicizing, denaturalizing, and deconstructing masculinity leaves it standing as femininity’s ungrounded ground. Accordingly, investigating the social construction of Jewish masculinity is or can be a profoundly and queerly feminist project…

What does seem to me problematic, however, is a failure to attend to how the questions and modes of analysis we privilege (and I do not exempt myself from this failure) may unwittingly reproduce what and where we would critique. In other words, how can we narrow [italics mine] our range of research “objects” without contracting our angles of vision? 383

When research “unwittingly reproduce(s)” structures of oppression, it does not fulfill its goal of undermining the distorted understandings of humanity produced by those structures in the first place. Gordon argues that when this takes place and humane institutions become sites for the ontologization of human presence, a peculiar and specific phenomenon can be witnessed on the level of language. As a result of the emergence of ontological humanity, language itself begins to carry features of what he calls a “phobogenic” reality. 384 Phobogenesis is what takes place when blackness (or Jewishness or womanness or any other ontological signification, for that matter) stimulates anxiety. 385 This understanding of phobogenesis is rooted in the study of


384 Gordon, Her Majesty’s Other Children, 36, 43.

385 Ibid., 43.
phenomena more so than psychology.\textsuperscript{386} The anxiety about these constructions may appear in history not as a psychopathology, but rather as a conscious effort to ontologize human presence by reinscribing naturalized human essences to their proper place.\textsuperscript{387} Thus a key feature of phobogenic realities is their relationship to ontological humanity, for according to Gordon, when the black is taken out of the realm of symbolic reality (that is, the ordinary realm of language) and locked into the material, epidermal manifestations of ontologized essence, then the black cannot merely be interpreted as indications of those things attributed to blacks by their ontologizers. Interpretation is a normal phenomenon of engaging symbolic forms.\textsuperscript{388} Admission that one is interpreting blacks would run counter to the logic of a racist ontology. Rather, the black becomes those things attributed to them, and as a result, “the black is rape, nymphomania, crime, stupidity, moral weakness, and sin.”\textsuperscript{389} Thus phobogenesis reflects identity-relations and/or signification chains rooted in bad faith.\textsuperscript{390}

This point is important for political reasons. Because the social problem can only be sustained through people’s belief in the veracity of an ontologized human “nature,”

\textsuperscript{386} Ibid., 39. This (and the fact that some of Fanon’s detractors criticize his non-traditional usage of psychoanalytic and other psychological texts) may be why Gordon insists on emphasizing the “theoretical” trajectory of Fanonian analysis.

\textsuperscript{387} Gordon, \textit{Her Majesty’s Other Children}, 44-45.

\textsuperscript{388} Gordon and Gordon, \textit{Of Divine Warning}, 33-34.

\textsuperscript{389} Gordon, \textit{Her Majesty’s Other Children}, 43-44.

\textsuperscript{390} Ibid., 37.
showing how human nature is constructed becomes essential for dismantling it.\textsuperscript{391}

Various constructions of human nature can be found operating in the mundane world. Fanon’s political theory insists that an important component of liberation involves locating and demystifying these ontologized forms of presence. This can occur by pointing out how, in the mundane, everyday world of ordinary affairs, these ontological humanities are made to seem natural, inevitable and “real.”\textsuperscript{392} An easy way to do this, according to Gordon and Fanon, is to find manifestations of human presence that presumably exemplify the “normative” humanity hailed as standard by the dominant narrative undergirding one’s specific focus of attention. After having done this, one need only locate instances exemplifying humanity’s transcendence of these normativities, and as a result, human knowledge of humanity expands. And as this kind of human knowledge expands, people’s opportunity to exercise political speech expands also.

Gordon’s diagnosis of the social problem suggests that anti-racist, anti-sexist language and the like must be able to avoid ontological ascriptions of human presence without denying the existence of humanity.\textsuperscript{393} This is because the elimination of human existence is actually the \textit{telos} of the social problem. When applied to human being, therefore, language must take its proper “place” in the realm of the symbolic.\textsuperscript{394} This

\textsuperscript{391} Gordon, \textit{Her Majesty’s Other Children}, 38-39.

\textsuperscript{392} Ibid; also see Miriam Peskowitz, “Engendering Jewish Religious History” in \textit{Judaism Since Gender}, Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 33.

\textsuperscript{393} Gordon, \textit{Fanon and the Crisis of European Man}, 86-87.

\textsuperscript{394} Ibid., 58, 65-66; Gordon, \textit{Disciplinary Decadence}, 45-47.
means that language undergirded by a catechismic metaphysical (read: ontological) grammar for social relations cannot be the basis of collaborative work in the human sciences, lest it be used in service of a phobogenic project.\textsuperscript{395} Acts of world-constitution are also required, through which language can be used to express humanity through affirmations of human existence. But as we have noted already, it is precisely such affirmations that are commonly avoided in cases of social problems. In addition, as Du Bois insisted, the formal content of social problems differs depending on their social context. For generations, layers of oppression—some of which appear to be global in scope—have been used to demarcate the non-existence of diverse human populations. Varieties of women, Jews, slaves and numerous other groups too multitudinous to mention have experienced the social death of subalternity, and their experiences have rendered attempts to provide adequate and scientifically rigorous language about their human realities difficult at best and nearly impossible at worst.

Addressing and eliminating the huge diversity of humanity’s social problems are much more easily spoken than done. Gordon therefore challenges human beings to question their own use of language and, if appropriate, adjust it to account for the dangers of ontologizing human presence. But his suggestions extend farther than simply being attentive to the precise use of language and the representational after-effects of its employment. He argues that in order to sever the link between the ontological fallacies of human institutions and their phobogenic consequences, theorists must learn to use terminal language in a way that restricts qualifications about “the determinate features of

\textsuperscript{395} Gordon, \textit{Fanon and the Crisis of European Man}, 103.
human beings” while unrestricting that languages’ potential for quantifying and qualifying over human possibility (or, in other words, expressing that “which renders the human being an indeterminate feature, always, of a greater story.”)\textsuperscript{396} In effect, this means that theorists cannot take the phenomenon of individuality for granted. The appearance of each individual, whether terminal, entitative, personal or otherwise, begs the question of a social world of human diversity, and this begging can be witnessed in cases of phobogenic anxiety. As mentioned above, phobogenesis arises when language falls prey to ontic significations over any given human existence and expression. Therefore a selected “quality” of humanity should not be exalted as a verifying standard for human existence, even though it can be used as a notation of human presence.

Human qualities such as being black, female, woman, Jewish, etc. must, in other words, ensure that a human essence be expressed (or literally “existed”) without allowing that essence to collapse into an essentialism.\textsuperscript{397} In effect, this means that subalterns’ decisions to express their human existence should be understood as equivocal in their choice to transcend social death.\textsuperscript{398}

\textsuperscript{396} Gordon, Disciplinary Decadence, 47.

\textsuperscript{397} Gordon, Her Majesty’s Other Children, 39, 44; Gordon, Fanon and the Crisis of European Man, 56-57.

\textsuperscript{398} See Gordon, Of Divine Warning, 78-79; Gordon, An Introduction to Africana Philosophy, 115-116. Here Gordon disagrees with Laurence Thomas’ assertion in Vessels of Evil: American Slavery and the Holocaust (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1993), 161, that “the conclusion to be drawn here is not that natal alienation is on par with extermination, but that natal alienation is, or certainly can be, an extraordinary evil that has nothing whatsoever to do with death.” It is interesting that both Gordon’s and Thomas’ analysis can be seen as a commentary on the role and effects of social death.
Although one can begin one’s analysis of the human condition with seemingly particular qualities of humanity (Jew, black, woman, etc.), these qualities may actually open up possibilities to analyze humanity in general, albeit from perspectives of “inclusive otherness” (or affirmed alterity) as opposed to those of “exclusive otherness” (or denied alterity).\(^{399}\) Using language in a way that appeals to the human condition as fundamentally open carries with it some powerful benefits. For instance, it is opposed to language that segments human populations from each other by emphasizing the untranslatable experiences of difference. Although difference is an undeniable aspect of social reality, existence is equally an assumed feature of the social world. And if existence constitutes a condition of social reality, then different humanities have a common knowledge from which to build a common political discourse, despite the various histories of constraining and denying human presence.\(^{400}\) This phenomenon of building a common discourse is what Gordon calls “speech,” and according to him, it can help address the many social problems capable of arising from a proliferation of ontologized subject positions. It is a way of acknowledging human multiversity while resisting its potential to engender new, multiverse forms of oppression.

Gordon and Fanon have not been alone in reaching this conclusion. It bears profound similarities to insights produced in the work of transnational feminist and

\(^{399}\) For an example of this formula as it relates to issues of Jewish creolization, see Gilbert Bond, *Paul and the Religious Experience of Reconciliation: Diasporic Community and Creole Consciousness* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), vii, viii, ix. What Bond mentions here in relation to creolization and exclusive/inclusive otherness appears virtually identical to Gordon’s vectors of social relations.

\(^{400}\) Gordon, *Of Divine Warning*, 79.
postcolonial research. These approaches and others have paid attention to the scholarly value of humanities undergirded by a fully human existence. As historian Miriam Peskowitz writes,

It is this process of naturalizing gender that must become a more articulated focus of feminist analysis and conversation about Jews, Jewishness, and Judaism... The problem is not that gender is absent from either the past or from our renderings of history; even a womanless history is simultaneously and necessarily gendered. The claim of such an absence is possible only when gender is mistakenly used as a simple synonym for women. The problem is not gender’s absence, but the absence of a critical analysis of gender. A more powerful project investigates something that is present but hidden, largely through our familiarity with masculinist histories and culture. When we ignore things that are already there, when we let masculinist constructions of categories stand, feminist work can actually bolster and protect these historical and cultural narratives of Rabbinic and other forms of Judaism. Any intellectual venture—feminist and nonfeminist—can reify sexual difference, in startlingly similar ways. Historically varied Jewish cultures have articulated and reified sexual differences. Cultural productions—scholarly and popular writing and other media—that formulate knowledge of Judaism and Jews in past time can participate, or not participate, in the construction and reification of sexual difference.

A study of Judaism that is feminist and critical demands our increasingly nuanced analysis of how these notions of difference are articulated, argued, made persuasive, given authority, and made to seem normal [italics in original].

If Gordon’s approach is correct, what Peskowitz says here of the need to articulate the process of naturalizing and reifying Jewish sexual difference is true in regard to the naturalization and reification of Jewish racial difference as well. This suspension of ontological formulations of human being brackets the tendency to naturalize identity in

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the form of reified substances. And it does so while privileging analyses of the human world as lived. Both Gordon and Peskowitz, for example, insist on the need to recover an understanding of what takes place in the world of the everyday and mundane.402 Thus although similar conclusions about suspending ontological claims have been reached by other scholars working in different fields of research, Gordon’s route to this goal is through a phenomenological investigation of the intersecting worlds of racism and neocolonialism. Because colonized populations who resist their oppression must take their own reified absence into account in their representations of social reality, their insights can be more comprehensive than those perspectives that lock oppressed people into preformulations of ontologized humanity. This approach can bring out the political dimensions of language that suffuses the mundane world with Jewish meaningfulness, yet refuses to carry out the task of naturalizing either Jewish or human presence.

Allow me to review what has been raised in the present chapter.

The basic problem of the human sciences is the metastability of the presumed subject and object of inquiry. The metastable dimension of humanity demands that representing human reality will not be sufficient if that representation is premised on articulations of ontologized human states. This is why the language one uses to refer to the human condition is extremely important. If social problems, human beings and the language representing their relation are all understood as metastable, then the possibility is raised that these three may correspond. In his work, Gordon uses Fanon’s phenomenology of the colonial life-world to bring various dimensions of neocolonial

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racism into correspondence with other sites of human inquiry. His analysis and proposed solution takes the form of an existential sociodiagnostic on the lived-experiences of peoples who suffer the consequences of their ontologization in the midst of social problems. I have described the conceptual tools of this sociodiagnostic with descriptors such as ontological Jewishness, ressentiment, signification, evidence, bad faith, ontological humanity, subalternity, theodicy, phobogenesis, micro-institutions, macro-institutions, world-constitution and others. On the level of language, addressing social problems means severing the symbolic reality of speech from its ontologized materiality in social relations and thereby preempting the establishment of phobogenic traditions. But such an exercise requires an acute participation in a new, admittedly political project—that of closely inspecting how social reality as lived is informed and is constantly reforming one’s use of language. A radical implication of this observation is that language, when referring to alienated humanity’s existence, can be other than how it is formally understood. Mundane human existence may precede its formal essentialization, and because of this, an exploration of the phenomenological notion of a “life-world,” in its colonial and neocolonial aspects, becomes necessary.

403 Gordon, *Her Majesty’s Other Children*, 40, 43-44.

404 Gordon, “Existential Dynamics of Theorizing Black Invisibility,” 70; Gordon, *Of Divine Warning*, 78-79; Gordon, *Her Majesty’s Other Children*, 92; Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, 104-105; this project is political by virtue of politics being a condition governed by speech itself. The redistribution of material resources attendant to an adjustment of human society contingent upon that speech also makes the economic dimensions of Gordon’s reworking of human scientific method an issue that is also difficult to avoid. See Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence*, 19, 22.

Having laid out some of the basic concepts of Gordon’s postcolonial phenomenology, let’s now examine some implications of applying this phenomenological approach to the issue of immediate concern in the present dissertation: the social and historical study of African American Jews.
CHAPTER 3:
ONTOLOGICAL JEWISHNESS AND THE SOCIAL PROBLEMS
OF INTERPRETING JEWISH ARTIFACTS

In *A Voice From the South*, philosopher Anna Julia Cooper theorizes what human value means in a world filled with multiple oppressions.\(^{406}\) At a critical moment in her book, she asks the following provocative question: “What Are We Worth?”\(^{407}\) Although the “we” in this question includes humanity in general, she directs her book’s concern to two audiences in particular: (1) white female feminists who claim to represent all women’s interests, and (2) black male anti-racists who claim to represent all black people’s interests.\(^{408}\) Her message to these audiences is sobering and direct: progressive anti-sexist and anti-racist activists need to compare what they have produced in their lives with what humanity has invested in them.\(^{409}\) The point is not merely rhetorical. For Cooper, this means that although white women and black men may be sincere in their respective fights against sexism and racism, both groups’ concerns with *their own*


\(^{407}\) Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, 228.

\(^{408}\) Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, xxxi; White, “One and All,” 90-91.

interests raise important questions about the values they actually hold. After all, a person fighting only one type of oppression is not necessarily fighting human oppression in general, as though the total number of oppressions were finite and could be mathematically added together. If a given group of feminists claim to be working for the liberation of women, but in practice, concern themselves only with the problems of white women, then one may question whether or not those feminists consider women of color to be “women” at all. Likewise, if antiracist black males only address the antiblack racism directed against black males, then one might question whether they consider black women to be “black” at all. These considerations amount to the observation that resisting one group’s oppression may itself constitute a new oppressive practice. When one believes one is making progress against race and sex discrimination, one may actually be re-inscribing and recreating the social problems they indicated in the first place. In effect, this means that people who claim to fight injustice also carry the burden of proving that their actions really do make the world a better place.

410 Ibid., 233; Gordon, An Introduction to Africana Philosophy, 72-73, esp. his comments on Cooper’s writings and their relation to Nietzschean theories of value.

411 Cooper is criticizing a logic of addition that is often applied to oppressions. Simply stated, if the emergence of new kinds of humanity is constantly taking place, then the possibility of new kinds of oppressions against them is constantly emerging. Fighting the oppression of one group alone, therefore, may do nothing about the new oppressions which emerge in the wake of one’s attempt to dismantle a single type of oppression. Cooper says that an approach is needed which curtails the possibility that new oppressions will emerge out of old ones. See Cooper, A Voice from the South, 231.

412 Ibid., 232, esp. Cooper’s insistence that in analyses of race prejudice, unlike the calculations of math, “In vain [do] you show the unreason of the feeling.”

413 Ibid., 232-233, esp. her comments on “the world” or the global economic dimensions of human worth.
In order to demonstrate how one’s actions make the world better, Cooper recommends examining the relationship between one’s raw materials and one’s products. She argues that historians, critics, activists and other workers cannot be held responsible for the state in which their raw material is found. Instead they can only be held responsible for what they do with the material they have. No material, she reminds her readers, emerges in history without a series of affairs attendant to its appearance. Yet it is the responsibility of every worker to learn what affairs produced the material before them and in light of these affairs, do whatever is necessary to improve the value of that material. If the material’s situational context was less than ideal, then the worker should strive to improve that situation also. Such efforts at material or situational improvement are what Cooper calls “labor.” Labor, or the work involved in improving the value of one’s raw materials, is an indispensable category for Cooper’s theory of human value. She boldly insists that for the human world to be better, a great deal more labor is required to improve it than most people will admit. For example, Cooper points out the tendency of “foolhardy educators” to force “preconstructed molds

414 Ibid., 233-234.
415 Ibid., 237, 240.
416 Ibid., 234.
417 Ibid., 236-238, 240.
418 Ibid., 240.
419 Ibid., 243-244.
and grooves” (read: ontologized ideals) onto common, everyday, ordinary material. And although she recognizes that ordinary materials are not ideal, she is adamant that the shortcomings of one’s materials should not under any circumstances be considered a justification for ignoring them. Improving their value simply requires using more labor.

Cooper’s words are instructive for beginning our inquiry into the study of African American Jewry. What she writes concerning the relationship between multiple oppressions, raw materials, labor and human betterment is applicable to the social problems of conducting human scientific research on various Africana Jewish peoples. When studying the histories of African American Jews and their Judaisms, one encounters a great deal of writings and artifactual materials that are not ideal. Many of the artifacts relating to Jews of color have been damaged because of the history of various oppressions accompanying them. Other artifacts have survived, but are difficult to interpret because either their meanings or the communities that sustained those meanings have been lost to history. When African American Jews themselves constitute one’s materials, the difficulties are compounded.

Consider my simple ascription of “Jewish,” “Hebrew,” and “Israelite” terms to this dissertation’s populations of primary concern. From a phenomenological

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420 Ibid., 258-259.

421 Ibid., 238-240, esp. her comments on Southern slavery, “There is no doubt that the past two hundred and fifty years of working up the material we now inherit, has depreciated rather than enhanced its value.” Throughout this passage Cooper appears to be using the concept of one’s raw materials as a metaphor for human values.

422 Ibid., 241, 244-245, 246, 249-251.
perspective, to attribute only these names to Africana Jewish communities is not sufficiently rigorous, for if the names imply the exclusion of other identities, their use can result in an ontological reading of “Jewish,” “Hebrew,” and “Israelite” histories. This is because there are many Africana Jewish communities that maintain historical links to Jews and Judaism, yet do not publicly refer to themselves by any of these names. British researchers, for example, have in recent years claimed that the Lemba people of southern Africa have been genetically proven to be of Hebrew ancestry. Yet, for generations, various peoples in southern Africa considered them in ordinary speech to be “Lemba,” not “Jewish.” Although the emphasis on their Jewish roots in the dominant media has contributed to their public appearance as “Lemba Jews,” it is not this transformation that has created the historical Jewishness of the Lemba. Even when Western Jewry did not recognize their Jewish ancestry, many Lemba understood themselves as Jews. Thus the historic ability of Jewish, Hebrew, Israelite and other creolized Africana populations to move in and out of various ethnic formations, yet maintain historical links to their Hebrew heritages, is something that can be researched on its own merit. Yet these Africana Jewish creolizations cannot be examined using ontological notions of Jewishness; researching them requires a methodology that integrates multiple vectors of social action while suspending ontological commitments. Gordon uses precisely such an approach when he notes that phobogenic anxiety can emerge in response to experiences

that question the necessity and sufficiency of one’s ontological constructions.\textsuperscript{424} For example, it is clear that “the Jew” stimulates phobogenic anxiety for the Judeophobic constructor of ontological Jewishness. “The homosexual” does the same for the homophobic constructor of ontological homosexuality. And in a social world where Jewishness is ontologized as “white,” the presence of “black Jews” stimulates anxiety in the form of confusion and/or contestation of the categories “white,” “black” and “Jewish.”\textsuperscript{425}

At this point we may initiate our first phenomenological reduction of the Jewish colonial natural attitude. And a most important aspect of our phenomenological observation shall be the following: that phobogenesis may arise when encountering any ontologized object—not simply ontological terms or ontological humanity.\textsuperscript{426} This means the realm of human artifacts, upon which are based many constructions of anthropological, sociological, psychological and historical knowledge, may be included among the sites of phobogenetic encounters.\textsuperscript{427} Interpreters of human artifacts must

\textsuperscript{424} Gordon, \textit{Her Majesty’s Other Children}, 43-44. Although the precise functions of creolization in Hebrew, Israelite, and Jewish communities cannot be covered in this study, it should be clear that Fanonian subalterns can live their Jewish, woman, Christian, homosexual, etc. existences in ways that, in Orlando Patterson’s words, “can cross the boundaries with social and supernatural impunity.” See Patterson, “Authority, Alienation and Social Death,” 117-118; for a methodology that integrates multiple vectors of social action, see Gordon, \textit{Disciplinary Decadence}, 120-121, esp. the discussion of Paget Henry’s phenomenology and Gordon’s “referring to black studies as \textit{Caliban} studies.”


\textsuperscript{426} Gordon, \textit{Her Majesty’s Other Children}, 43-44.

\textsuperscript{427} Gordon, \textit{Fanon and the Crisis of European Man}, 64-66. This interpretation is built on a Fanonian phenomenological analysis of instruments that undergo a reinterpretation through liberatory praxis. “Fanon argues that the veil, regardless of its traditional
therefore be aware of the potential for their research to stimulate phobogenic responses, particularly if their research uses racial ontologies to identify artifacts.\textsuperscript{428} Because the artifacts themselves can be misunderstood when ontological fallacies are used to identify them, an alternative framework for interpreting artifacts may be required.\textsuperscript{429}

For example, it is well known that for centuries many people in the United States believed Native Americans (and sometimes Africans) to be, in fact, the “lost tribes” of Israel.\textsuperscript{430} However, a great many important historical and transcendental questions are usually neglected once this fact is admitted. What impact, for instance, did this belief have on colonial era Euro-Jewish Americans’ cultures of sexuality and artifact production? If it is true that some colonial Jews of European ancestry (both male and function, is transformed under colonialism into a mark of resistance… During the period of revolutionary struggle, the veil goes through a dialectic between colonized signification, traditional Muslim signification, and its purely functional role as an opportune moment of concealment.” (p.64).


\textsuperscript{429} Long, \textit{Significations}, 5; Gordon raises the possibility of a new approach to artifact interpretation in his discussion of Fanon’s study of the veil. See Gordon, \textit{Fanon and the Crisis of European Man}, 64: “Veiled women became an important means of transporting weapons at one stage of the struggle (because of their ability to conceal contraband under traditional garments), and unveiled, “Europeanzied” Algerian women became an important means of getting past enemy lines (because of the enemy’s perception of their European dress representing their taking the Europeans’ side in the struggle)...”

female) married and bore children with African, Native American, and African American partners while holding these and similar beliefs, how can it be that these Afro-Native Americans of Jewish descent do not represent historically Jewish populations that may have produced artifacts of their own design? Much of the literature—particularly in the cases of Jewish patrilineality—concerns itself with how rabbinic Judaism should interpret their membership in or exclusion from certain Jewish communities. ⁴³¹ And in some sources, the potential for creolized forms of Afro-Jewish cultural continuity is minimized or ignored altogether. ⁴³² In the words of historian Graenum Berger: “the adoption and continuation of an obvious Jewish name [e.g., Walter Isaac] does not necessarily mean the retention of more than vestigial Jewish identification.” ⁴³³ Of course, Berger’s contention here is, prima facie, correct. And yet, his need to express this argument makes it evident that, at least for some people, it is found wanting. In other words, most of the literature dealing with people of color who are biological descendants of Jews does not address important questions about how such people understand themselves. Although Jews have rarely been portrayed as the dominant culture of Western civilization, a number of studies regarding the dominant American culture’s discourses on whiteness proceeded with a racial signification fallacy rooted in Euro-masculinist conversations on

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⁴³¹ Korn, Jews and Negro Slavery, 49; Berger, Black Jews in America, 24, 38n16; Landing, Black Judaism, 37.


⁴³³ Berger, Black Jews in America, 36.
who counted as “Jewish.” The result of this phenomenon was that public articulations of Jewish identity came to carry residues of proximity to dominant American cultural and

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435 Gordon, Her Majesty’s Other Children, 128, 136n33. A good recent example of this tendency can be found in the recent contention that “the social conditions that promoted a racial self-definition among Jews in America did not emerge until the 1870’s.” See Eric Goldstein The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity (Princeton: Princeton University, 2006), 12-13. I find it hard to argue that American slavery did not constitute one such social condition.
racial norms. Let us take, for example, the portrait (Figure 1 above) of a prominent colonial Jewish New Orleans merchant, Ashur Moses Nathan (b. 1784) and his son. Berger describes this painting as “a German Jew with his mulatto son.” It reveals some interesting dynamics about the role of pre-abolition Jewish families, including Jewish men and the mulatto children they fathered with uncounted numbers of women of color. In the painting, both father and son are well groomed and express at least a formal, tacit appreciation of their close proximity. (The son’s left hand is noticeably draped across his father’s left shoulder and the father’s left hand is in the son’s right.) But there is, I would argue, a great deal this painting both reveals and conceals at the same time. For example, the men’s dress reveals Euro-colonial apparels of the upper class. Added to these vestments are the prejudices associated with them. According to these prejudices, Europeans were superior to non-Europeans because Europe was the world’s standard-bearer of “civilization,” a concept that included notions

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438 The data of such phenomena is rather sparse. But anecdotal evidence suggests that Jewish men fathered numerous children with black women during the colonial era Caribbean. On the island of St. Thomas, for example, church records indicate that Jewish men fathered, on average, between 2 and 5 children per year with black women. See Judah Cohen, *Through the Sands of Time: A History of the Jewish Community of St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2004), 53.

of cultural life such as history, morality and family heritage. But the painter, solely by depicting both father and son in European-style clothing, suggests that the family heritage included the presence of dark-skinned people. For the mid-19th century United States, such a public acknowledgment was scandalous.

But the painter’s decision to depict Nathan alongside his son is not the only act represented here. There is more. The painter conceals the most significant person in the creation of this father-son relationship… the woman who gave birth to Nathan’s son. The mother is hidden from view, making a specific determination of her ethnic, moral and victimized status much more difficult for us—and possibly for the son as well. The historiographic issue, therefore, is how to identify a historical appearance when it is hidden from view, yet plainly indicated by the evidence of what is seen. It seems that when interpreting artifacts, what is “seen” could be deceiving, particularly if a great deal is hidden and unknown. The issue relates to the methodological problem of investigating intersecting social worlds without relying on ontological constructions in order to understand them. In the case above, it is reasonable to ask if our comprehension of the painting is being distorted when it is characterized as “a German Jew with his mulatto son” (italics mine). What makes one a “German?” What makes one a “Jew?” And what makes one a “mulatto?” According to Graenum Berger, Nathan immigrated to the United States in the 19th century and “became a prosperous dry-goods merchant in New

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441 Berger, Black Jews in America, 25.
Orleans and Baton Rouge.”

Does Nathan’s life represent, in Cooper’s words, “preconstructed molds” of specifically German Jewishness? Or does it represent ordinary Jewishness? And what of his son? What made him a mulatto? Were there not dark-skinned European Jews in the 19th century? Were there not light-skinned African Jews during the same time period? How do we know the son’s mother was not Jewish? If, as a researcher, I do not know, then what ontological norms am I reinscribing when I signify the painting as “a German Jew and his mulatto son?” These questions are not meant to trivialize artifactual interpretation. The point is that interpreting this painting as an artifact raises the question of whether human victims of erasure can be understood in a way that makes the artifactual evidence, material relevance, and historical reconstruction of their presence a feasible site of human scientific research.

For the sake of argument, let us admit that in most traditional European rabbinic Judaisms, Jewish identity is passed according to matrilineality. But in Berger’s rendering of this painting as “a German Jew with his mulatto son,” the reader is still presented with the possibility of patrilineal transmissions of both Jewish identities and ideologies of race. Because it is assumed that Nathan’s mulatto son has a non-Jewish (read: black) mother, a European-centered rendering of this painting could emphasize

442 Ibid.

443 By this statement, I do not mean to imply that only Euro-Jews function religiously according to the matrilineal principle—only that the principle itself has a particular evolutionary history with respect to the development of Mishnaic law on the basis of classical sources of European civilization. See Shaye Cohen’s The Beginnings of Jewishness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 263-307. The more basic point is that in the United States, it has been European, not African, norms that have overwhelmingly governed publicly antiblack articulations of Jewish identity.
how it was possible for a colonial Jewish man to father a non-Jewish child. But what’s interesting about this interpretation of the painting is its underlying assumption that only the father’s traditions of Jewishness legitimate the identity of the son. Thus there can be an interesting convergence of masculinism and matrilineality in racially ontological renderings of American Jewish identity. But in this convergence of patriarchy and matrilineality, the following simple fact could be easily ignored: It is the son’s existence that makes the son’s self-understanding relevant for any scholarly discussion of the mulatto son’s Jewish identity. This is not to suggest that every historian should assume the mulatto son understands himself as Jewish. The son could very well have understood himself as primarily European, although of biracial phenotype, in which case he might not believe his Jewishness present, at least not in the form of a strong identity. But there are many other possibilities, given the attention we have paid to Gordon’s vectors of social relations. One such possibility is that of a weak identity. If the son believed in patrilineal descent, then it stands to reason that he himself would have understood his Jewishness as obvious and as equally as valid as his father’s. The potential for the son to establish a strong identity on the basis of weak ideas about patrilineality should not be underestimated, particularly if the moral framework represented by his father’s tradition rejects his patrilineal identification outright and that of his mother’s traditions accept it. In short the problem with the assumptions behind asserting the darker son’s “mulatto” identity is not the act of interpretation itself; it is the unwillingness of

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445 Think here of Orlando Patterson’s argument about slavery found in Chapter 1.
researchers to consider how persons such as the son and the mother may have understood their own identities and to allow these considerations to complicate their research findings.

On the other hand, when scholars do begin to consider how Her Majesty’s Other Jewish Children may have seen themselves, a new range of historical questions emerge that have escaped many historians in the past. These new questions not only challenge colonial conceptions of Jewish identity; they challenge how researchers may go about searching and excavating Jewish experiences in postcolonial contexts. For instance, in the previous example, when we allowed the multiple vectors of the son’s social life to inform our investigation, then various possibilities concerning the son’s mother immediately came to the fore of our awareness. This analysis follows from an understanding that critical sex, race and gender approaches to Jewish history should function as basic to an investigation of the past. They should not be add-ons. When one does assume them to be basic, the questions and motifs of research likely shift more toward an appreciation of the human as ambiguous subject and object of history, not simply (as all too often in the case of subaltern populations) ossified, and objectified subjects.\footnote{Linda Martin Alcoff, “A Philosophical Account of Africana Studies: An Interview with Lewis Gordon,” in \textit{Nepantla: Views from South} 4.1 (Durham: Duke, 2003): 179.} What we notice is that similar observations can be made in other cases where females’ lives have been hidden and/or erased. Consider the painting here (below to the left) of a Native American woman, Sken What Ux. Colonial-era marriages between Euro-Jewish men and women of color led to cultural and religious creolization. Sken
What Ux, for example, was also known as “Elizabeth Friedlander.” She was a direct descendant of Kar Ne Za, the female chief of the Colville Indians. She herself was the daughter of famed Native American leader, “Standing Cloud,” and she married Isadore Friedlander, a Jewish trader who lived in the northwestern United States. Now from a micro-institutionally Eurocentric perspective, Friedlander’s marriage to Sken What Ux would have been considered “mixed.” However, if our historical analysis of colonial Jewish families macro-institutionally privileges the narratives of all the people involved in colonial Jewish life, then asking how Sken What Ux saw herself in relationship to Jewishness is unavoidable. Again, this is not presumptuously to conclude that she saw herself as “Jewish.” She could have seen herself as a “Hebrew,” an “Israelite,” or something else or nothing in particular. The historiographical method here only requires that historians first interrogate the discursive relationship between her self-understanding and her public identities, for in her case researchers could problematize many historians’ assumptions about mixture in the context of marriage. Translated, this means it is false to assume that marriage always demands cultural mixture—even if the married parties are from different cultures. Anthropological scholarship has demonstrated that for many

Figure 2: Sken What Ux

ethnic groups and cultures, marriage (much like slavery) actually constitutes a *de jure*
and/or *de facto* basis for the spouse’s ethnic inclusion if the *prima facie* circumstance of a
marriage or slave purchase is one of ethnic “mixture.”

Simply, that is, by virtue of her marriage to a European Jew, Sken What Ux—while not expunging her Native American
heritages one iota—could very well have also thought of herself as equally and validly
belonging to Jewish people—that is, as Jewish as her husband. Thus Sken What Ux
could have been Jewish *due to* her Native heritage, not vice versa. And if this was the
case, then one may begin to imagine historical scenarios involving Native American
Jewry—a various set of ethnic heritages which, although neglected in normative
renderings of American Jewish history, survive well into the present day.

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448 Carol R. Ember, Melvin Ember and Peter Peregrine *Anthropology* (Upper Saddle

449 An implication of this analysis lay in the historical potential of women and slaves to
participate in culturally productive labor. Biblical and rabbinic associations of the
relationship in halakhic status between non-Jewish slaves and Jewish wives suggest that
rabbis noticed this connection many centuries before its instantiation in the context of
trans-Atlantic slavery. Jonathan Schorsch’s (2004) research in this regard may therefore
be read less as a history of Blacks and Jews during early modernity and more of an
analysis of Euro-Jewish attempts to religiously regulate and limit the cultural
consequences of colonial Jewish participation in intercontinental human trafficking. In
addition, various classical Hebrew narratives deal with the issues surrounding the
problems of cultural embraces. The biblical story of Ruth is only one of numerous
examples.

450 For a good distillation of the textual-mythic foundations of the belief regarding Native
Americans as Israelites, see David Katz’s (2001) “Israel in America: The Wanderings of
the Lost Ten Tribes from Mikveigh Yisrael to Timothy McVeigh,” in *The Jews and the
Expansion of Europe to the West 1450-1800*, edited by Paolo Barnardini and Norman
Fiering. See also John L. Jackson, Jr.’s (2005) *Real Black: Adventures in Racial
Sincerity*, pp109-114. Katz’s and Jackson’s approaches to the racist configurations are
historically accurate; however, they neglect to mention the majority of instances in which
such mythologies are used to construct rather ordinary familial and ancestral narratives.
Native American Hebrew traditions continue in the 21st century, and most of their bearers
The portraits of Sken What Ux and Ashur Nathan’s son indicate that micro-institutional standpoints of Judaism may no longer suffice for the expansion of historical knowledge about colonial Jewish family life in the Americas. Although it is true that one may use African and Native American cultural assumptions to inform such a historical inquiry, my argument is that in the case of Jewish family life, even a Eurocentric point of departure alone now demands a serious reassessment of the topic. For although it seems my exercise in considering new historiographic assumptions has slightly de-centered the Eurocentric paradigm of researching the Jewish family, it has not done so in fact. My observation of these artifacts’ situations still began—and ended—with the assumption that it is the European Jewish father’s Jewishness that is the locus of the transmission of Jewish identity. This assumption does not address the possibility that Jewish, Hebrew and Israelite traditions evolved in Africa (and Native America, for that matter) in ways historically independent of European and Mediterranean rabbinism. And until such possibilities are admitted and addressed, researchers will not have de-centered the presumption of Euro-rabbinic priority attached to questions about the various forms of historical presence found in America’s Afro-Jewish Diasporas. This means the social are not terrorists nor dangerous to society. The topic needs to be explored more fully and without the theological presuppositions that have guided previous studies on the topic. The historiographic employment of a methodologically atheistic approach might reveal that the racial heterogeneity mentioned by Jackson was occasioned both by the purchase / ethnic absorption of enslaved Africans by Native Americans and by the intermarriage of Native Americans with African Americans. These stories are encoded in the conspiracy texts of some urban Afro-Jewish groups and has yet to be elucidated in scholarship. To see how such narratives might intersect in the case of persons such as William Taylor, see William Katz’s *Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage* (New York: Atheneum, 1986), especially Katz’s research on Seminoles, the ethnic group to which both Jessie and William Taylor belonged.
reality of various Hebrew Diasporas will haunt those who seek to write colonial and pre-abolition Jewish history primarily through the lens of Western civilization.}\(^{451}\) For a postcolonial Jewish historiography, alternative Jewish and Hebrew traditions constitute an insightful and revealing lens through which to understand the complexity of various American Jewish histories. Consider the following portrait of Floridian farmer, William Taylor (picture to left).

According to family lore, William Taylor was a North Carolina-born, Native American mulatto. Around the turn of the last century, Taylor fathered a daughter named Jessie. Jessie was a “Hebrew.”\(^{452}\) But as with many people of color living during the Jim Crow period, no written record of Hebrew or Jewish ancestry can be traced to either her father or mother. Although it is therefore possible that, due to her Native American heritage, Jessie was considered Jewish by virtue of the

\(^{451}\) For an example of where this approach may lead, consider Schorsch’s observation in *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World*, 217. He laments that “next to nothing is known about the religious life of slaves,” because few communal ordinances, responsa or “similar documents” remain extant.

\(^{452}\) My source for this information was Jessie’s son, Benjamin.
“Lost Tribes” tradition mentioned above, no one alive today knows what Jessie herself believed about her ancestry. How Jessie became a “Hebrew” has seemingly been lost to history, and memories of her dissipate with the passing of the family’s elders. The belief that she was an Afro-Native American Jew, however, remains in the memories of her posterity, and amongst Jessie’s grandchildren, one may find all three of these ethnic heritages represented. Stories such as Jessie’s demonstrate how re-writing American Jewish history demands the use of techniques that cannot only detect the rise of Hebrew/Jewish narratives out of non-Jewish contexts; they also require an acute sensitivity to the historical conditions most favorable to both Jewish historical appearance, disappearance, and concealment. It is not only the case that some

453 One interesting aspect of Jessie Taylor’s story has to do with how her appearance evolved through the oral lore communicated in the extended family that she herself helped create. Jessie married multiple times and gave birth to no less than ten children. But when the author consulted the different immediate “families” to which Jessie belonged, three different ethnic narratives emerged, depending on which family was consulted and what the public appearance of her husband may have been. When consulting the family of her childhood (brothers, sisters, parents, etc.), Jessie’s ethnic heritage was understood to be “Seminole”—as was everyone else’s in that family. But the children from Jessie’s first marriage knew nothing of her being Native American. They understood themselves and their parents to be “Black.” However, when consulting the children from her second marriage, they understood her to be both “Hebrew” and “Seminole.” What’s interesting here is that these identities each corresponded to the public identities of the leading male figures in each household. Jessie’s father was publicly “Seminole.” Her first husband was publicly “Black.” And her second husband was publicly “Hebrew.” And each of these families continued to refer to Jessie using the patriarchal identity as the basic frame of reference. The different families, furthermore, were only in partial awareness that the other families may have inherited seemingly different narratives about Jessie’s ethnic identity—particularly the children from her first marriage in reference to her Seminole and Hebrew ancestries. All the families assumed Jessie was “Black,” which as they used the term, seemed to necessarily entail mixture.

454 In his reflections on colonialism and racism, Frantz Fanon suggested this could be achieved by what he called a “sociogenic” approach to understanding black historical presence. As a nuanced account for providing balance to the phylogenetic and ontogenic
historians have not noticed Native American Jews such as Jessie Taylor. Historical conditions may have been such that those Jews preferred not being noticed at all. Considering the examples of Asher Moses Nathan and son, Sken-What-Ux, and William and Jessie Taylor, there are at least two things that stand out in these narratives. First of all, the bearers of these traditions come from communities that are not only mixed but also actively embrace this mixture as an ordinary mode of how Hebrews and/or Jews move through history. For these people, participation in Jewish cultural and religious discourses clearly does not preclude their participation in other cultural narratives. In short, they are creoles. Because of this, we notice a second phenomenon: that the rules of legitimation and cultural embrace do not necessarily function in these people’s forms of Judaism the same way as they do in colonial communities of rabbinic Euro-Jews.

Colonial Euro-Judaism functioned by applying normative standards of community approaches of humanistic psychologists, Fanon is correct. However, there seems to be functioning in Africana religious traditions socioteleologies that regulate not only how society constitutes cosmic meaning-systems, but also how societies make those meaning-systems fade away into a popularly forgotten cultural history. See Frantz Fanon, Toward the African Revolution (New York: Grove, 1967), 18: As Fanon himself states, one cannot appreciate these psychological dynamics without an existential appreciation of the ontological misconfigurations of black humanity. Fanon’s project, as it relates to the phenomenology of African American religion, was never completed. I offer here the concept and hermeneutical significance of a sociotelic analysis of black spirituality as one clue to understanding the plausibility structures embedded in Afro-Judaism (and possibly many other Africana religious traditions).

For an excellent description of this predicament, see Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 116.

In most previous research, artifactual resources that did not depend on a historical connection to Europe were often interpreted according to the dictates of a trenchant genealogical fallacy. For example, in cases such as that of Jessie Taylor, traditional historians have assumed that if existent at all, her Judaism must have incorporated a variety of contradictory ethnic narratives. Yet a more sophisticated approach, one that avoids ontological genealogies by adopting a macro-institutional orientation toward human being, would assume that her narrative’s complexity actually leaves more material, not less, for the historian of Judaism to reflect upon. From this perspective, alleged contradictions to a person’s Jewish self-understanding may be viewed with suspicion. And for persons such as Jessie, I contend that historical reflections on her identity may be best understood through those persons and institutions closest to her—that is, her family and friends. It turns out that as a young woman, Jessie married a man of Egyptian Jewish descent, and so she and/or others may have considered her “Hebrew” in part because she married a Jewish man. In my research I found that Jessie bore numerous children. From this gentleman she had three children, following the seven children she bore from a previous marriage. But she died at a relatively young age due to complications arising from a fourth pregnancy with the Jewish man. And

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458 This information was gathered from multiple children of Jessie Taylor. Her sons Benjamin, Ivory, Thomas and some of her grandchildren as well.

459 The author learned these details from Jessie’s children and upon speaking to Helen Simmons, the woman who signed Ms. Taylor’s death certificate.
yet it was her children that served as verbal informants of her (and their) heritages, Hebrew and Jewish narratives I found substantiated by no written archival resource.

Jessie Taylor’s story is only one among many uncounted others. Many non-Europeans died under slavery and colonialism, and a history of traditional Africana Judaism cannot only be beholden to the survivors. It must also document the stories and thoughts of those progenitors who suffered extermination while still under Euro-colonial rule. It is also important to remember that these circumstances are not unique in the history of Jewish peoples. Many Jews of Russian derivation have no archival records verifying their Jewish ancestry. Yet their family traditions are generally accepted as a basis on which to assert Russian Jewry’s existence. Women such as Jessie Taylor, Sken-What-Ux and the mother of Ashur Nathan’s son are not here to tell their own stories, but given the fact that their descendants have preserved significant fragments of information about them, those fragments comprise historically relevant documentations of their Jewish existence. As Paula Hyman reminds us in *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*,

The inclusion of gender in the study of Jewish assimilation thus introduces for consideration the domestic realm, which has tended to disappear from historical view. Given the privatization of much of Jewish behavior in the wake of emancipation, historians must enter the Jewish home to assess the nature of Jewish assimilation. To do so, they have to work assiduously and creatively, mining resources like memoirs, diaries, personal correspondence, and material culture to bridge the division of public and
private spheres and to explore the tensions between public and private selves.  

Returning now to our original topic, when we look at pre-abolition Jewish families through the lenses of colonialism and slavery, a very different picture begins to emerge than the one that has thus far gained acceptance in scholarly circles. The current popular “picture” of the colonial American Jewish family is based primarily on a Euro-masculinist model: one (white) man married to one (white) woman at a time, with biologically Jewish children if their mother was Jewish. And for purposes of public accountability and historiography, this racially exclusive and monogamous model makes good sense. Because of the role Europeanity played in colonial societies in general, it accounts for a certain degree of both cultural homogeneity and mixture (say, in cases where the mother was European, but not Jewish or in cases where the marriage was mixed between Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews, however one understands these designations). However, such a model is severely limiting when it is remembered that colonial Jewish family life—especially when it came to sex—carried dimensions of privacy unmatched by most other features of societal existence then. In fact I would argue that sexual practices during the centuries of New World slave trafficking probably reveal as much or more about colonial Jewish family life as any other area of investigation. As is well known, the colonial sex trade accompanied the trans-Atlantic

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460 Paula E. Hyman, Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representation of Women (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 23.
slave trade and even continues into the twenty-first century.\textsuperscript{461} At least in terms of the widespread practices of specifically Jewish interracial sexuality, the impact of this sex trade was made evident by the phenotypic diversity found throughout colonial Jewish plantations and populations.\textsuperscript{462} For my purposes, I want to use this common knowledge of interracial sexuality in order to consider a fundamental shift in how one “pictures” the colonial Jewish family in the Americas. The work of Jonathan Schorsch has, for instance, demonstrated how economic, cultural, and demographic realities came together to force both Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews of the colonial Atlantic world frequently to compromise their presumably ideal vision of a primarily white or European family structure.\textsuperscript{463} Even in cases where monogamy between two white partners framed the public record of a slave or servant-holding Jewish family’s constitution, the determination of the actual constitution of such families was more difficult to ascertain—primarily because of the widespread practice of using African men and women as concubines.\textsuperscript{464} For this reason, a constant awareness of not only the public record, but

\textsuperscript{461} For a brief overview of contemporary slavery in the United States, see Kevin Bales and Becky Cornell, \textit{Slavery Today} (Toronto: Groundwood, 2008), 76, 79-81.

\textsuperscript{462} Examples of this phenomenon in the secondary literature are legion. For only a few such references, see Arbell, \textit{The Jewish Nation of the Caribbean}, 151; Korn, \textit{Jews and Negro Slavery}, 48-56; Berger, \textit{Black Jews in America}, 11; Jacob Rader Marcus, \textit{United States Jewry: 1776-1985, Volume 1} (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1989), 35, 91, 586; Saul Friedman, \textit{Jews and the American Slave Trade} (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1998), 112, 136, 156-157, 170-172, 183-184, etc.


also the hidden cultural transcripts only symbolized by the accepted sexual mores of
slave-trafficking colonialism, a postcolonial Jewish historiography must continually
question assumptions of a European or any other ontologized cultural genesis in its
interpretation of artifacts. Instead of relying on artifacts derived from ontological
Jewishness, it should privilege an imaginative reconstruction of artifactual identification
in cooperation with the biological (and otherwise) descendants of Jews victimized by
forced “marriages,” mass enslavement, the sex trade, cargo cults, human trafficking and
other systems of oppression that produced Fanonian subalterns. In effect, this means that
Jewish artifactual interpretation is inseparable from acts of world-constitution. On the
basis of world-constituted artifacts, therefore, scholars will be able to establish new forms
of historical evidence.

As one may plainly see, these arguments rest on a methodologically open
understanding of Jewish identity. This means that Jewish historical presence among
blacks is not contingent on the vectors of sociality requiring an affirmed alteritous
relation between colonial-era white Jews and pre-abolition Jews of color. For this reason,
our argument thus far must be buttressed by applying the postcolonial phenomenological
approach outlined in the last chapter to the study of Jewish artifactual analysis. If Gordon
is correct in his assertion that “the Negro… is irrelevant to his own characterization,”
then one may ponder the extent to which previous scholarship on pre-abolition American
“blacks” and “Jews” has, in actuality, reflected strong and weak denials of Her Majesty’s

Population of the United States in 1820,” in The Jewish Experience in America, Volume
Other Jewish children. In other words, for the student of colonial American Jewry / Judaism, spaces and places in which constructions of race, class, sex and gender become inseparable, even identical, are relevant for one’s understanding of each in isolation. And if our reflections on the metastability of consciousness have been accurate, then this means that human beings in multiracial, multisexual contexts could not only live, for example, as black women or black Jews. They could also live as Jews because black or as black and therefore Jews. If true, this would mean that African American identity

465 Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, 58-59; also see Jacob Dorman, *The Black Israelites of Harlem and the Professors of Oriental and African Mystic Science in the 1920’s*, 218. The excerpt from Dorman’s dissertation demonstrates the point. In an effort to remove racist assumptions from the scholarship, because Dorman’s ontological categories remain untranscended, the precise conceptual reach of his “blacks” and “Jews” appears to be quite similar to the racialistic assumptions he is criticizing. Throughout his dissertation, and despite his intentions, “Jews” and “white Jews” remain almost conceptually indistinguishable.

466 These would presumably be existential categories, not ontological ones. Think here of the Hebrew-Israelites’ constructions of identity. See Jackson, *Real Black*, 109-114. Needless to say, this truism has been one of the difficulties that white researchers have had with African American Jews’ religious ideas. One of the problems with eliminating the reasonableness of these notions from the scope of one’s scientific analysis is that they occur from the starting point of alienation, not vice versa. In other words, the metastable identities may conjure any public justification for their ontological establishment that the particular individual wishes. However, one cannot and should not confuse the assertion of one’s existence with the erection of nation-states and political structures designed to oppress other human beings. Human expressions alone do not make one an Orientalist, regardless of nationality. The more important insight behind African American spiritualities, I think, is to affirm the humanity of the existence that is being expressed—wherever it is found and however it appears. This is something that can be learned from spending enough time examining how the liturgical spaces cultivated by black Americans actually function. But quantifying facts over backgrounds sustained by ontological fields—no matter how polycultural in appearance—will not reveal this dynamic. I take this insight from Fanon. See Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove, 1967), 18: “… since what is important is not really sought after, one falls back on what is contingent. This is one of the laws of recrimination and of bad faith. The urgent thing is to rediscover what is important beneath what is contingent” (italics mine). Thus when researching subaltern populations,
construction could be examined using the vectors of social recognition introduced in the last chapter. And it would also mean that one has a way to move forward on representing historical and social reality without its being necessarily subsumed by ontological discourse. The question we are now presented with, however, is to what extent pre-abolition American Jewish life was characterized by historical contexts making these creolized assertions of Jewish identity possible and/or likely. Were African American Israelite, Hebrew, Jewish communities and their kin identifying themselves in these ways? Were Africana Hebrew populations who transgressed ontologically Jewish identity assignments reasonable outgrowths of colonial era American Jewish life?

I do not see how a negative response can be made without committing numerous ontological fallacies and ignoring a vast amount of evidence to the contrary. Take, for instance, the artifactual significance of African American spirituals. In previous times, if enslaved African Americans sang spirituals in which they declared themselves to be “Hebrews” or “Israelites,” it was easier for historians to assume, with little or no investigation of the behavioral content of those liturgical performances whatsoever, that what these Africans meant could only be understood allegorically.467 This meant that black Americans could not posit weak or strong affirmations of identity through song; they could only metaphorically identify with the Hebrews of the Bible. And if these same slaves, it was believed, began behaving in ways that suggested their belief in their Hebrew or Israelite identity was anything more than allegorical, the only appropriate a phenomenology of value must necessarily attend one’s historical analysis of the vectors of artifactual influence.

conclusion was a phobogenic one: their behavior exemplified black people’s proneness to psychopathalogy, hysteria and a general maladjustment to civilization. However, once we consider the great multiversity and variety of cultures transplanted from the African continental context onto the American landscape through transcontinental slave trafficking, we have to reassess whether or not prior historians were succumbing to ontological fallacies when they argued that African Americans were either mistaken or confused in positing their own Hebrew or Israelite identities or that those identities needed to be justified by historical confirmation. When phobogenic responses to African American cultural artifacts emerge, researchers in the humanistic sciences must refrain from attempts to locate and justify the existence of the African Americans who produced the artifacts. It may be the case that one’s cultural understandings are limited and biased. It may also be the case that upon encountering persons from different cultural backgrounds, one’s questionable assumptions about human reality may be challenged. But in the effort to produce intellectually rigorous scholarship, research in the humanistic sciences should not succumb to a phobogenic desire to justify a person or group’s existence. From this point forward, I will refer to the phobogenic research designed to assess Africana Jews’ identity claims as the “Black Jewish Studies” project.

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The above map is an early example of the type of “Black Jewish Studies” project that attempted to locate origins for African American Jews.\(^{470}\) It can be found in the work of Joseph Williams, a priest who lived during the 20\(^{th}\) century. Williams believed that throughout central and western Africa, one could see evidence of “Hebrewisms” or cultural practices that could be identified with the ancient Hebrews of the Bible.\(^{471}\) As a

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\(^{471}\) This topic is not a new one for many African peoples. I do not have the expertise necessary to explore the topic; however, numerous traditions of sub-Saharan African Hebrew communities exist. For example, Gordon informed the author through personal communication that V.Y. Mudimbe, while working as a priest in the Congo and Rwanda, “mentioned the old synagogues he encountered here and there,” some of which predated the arrival of the Belgians and the French. The sheer number of these traditions alone marks the need for serious ethnographic work to be done in sub-Saharan Africa.
personal mission, Williams sought out to record these traditions for the “Western” world, and in drawing this map, he was attempting to demonstrate how “possible diversions” of human migration could lead to the present-day “resultant tribes” in West Africa.\textsuperscript{472} The present-day tribes are indicated by broken lines and include ethnic groups such as the Yoruba and Ashanti. Also noticeable is the ease with which Williams accommodates places of archaeological significance in his map-making. By incorporating the presence of modern-day tribes along ancient trade routes, he attempts to provide a scholarly explanation for meeting black peoples who are evidently Jewish. But in order to do so, he relies on a form of ontological Jewishness. He does this by offering the explanation of a link, a genealogical connection, between African peoples and the ancient Hebrews. This Afro-Hebraic lineage, he seems to have believed, could literally be “seen” if the reader were provided with a way to visualize how Hebrews could be found in Africa. Therefore the more linear his cartography of African Hebrews, the more credible his account may have been to white audiences. If “the Negro… is irrelevant to his own characterization,” the fact that African people change would have been negligible. Williams’ ontological Jewishness is indicated by his map’s depiction of Jerusalem, Memphis and Elephantine. (Cairo, Alexandria, Suez and other modern cities are neglected.) At the time Williams was writing, these ancient cities were all sites of archaeological digs that were being combed for evidence of an ancient Jewish presence. By visualizing the possibility of human migration across the African continent, Williams attempted to substantiate his claims regarding the existence of African Hebrewisms.

\textsuperscript{472} Ibid.
The lack of reliable archaeology led a number of researchers in Black Jewish Studies to adopt similar cartographic strategies as Williams. In fact, the cartographic elements of constructing African American Jewish genealogy seemed to have reached a fever pitch during the 20th century, with various scholars mapping out imaginative and geographic projections of what they believed to be historically plausible accounts of Afro-Jewish historical movement. According to Arthur Dobrin (see above), one early

Figure 5: Arthur Dobrin's map
researcher who sought out the origins of black American Jewry, mapping African American Jews through confirmable historical research would provide scholarship with a reliable track record of traditions, lore and practices that could substantiate Afro-Jewish claims of historicity.\footnote{Arthur Dobrin, \textit{A History of the Negro Jews in America}, p.1-2, unpublished book on microfilm, in Box 8, Black Judaism Research, the James Landing Collection, Special Collections and University Archives, Richard J. Daley Library, University of Illinois at Chicago.} Consider his account of Africana Jewish migration.\footnote{Arthur Dobrin, \textit{A History of the Negro Jews in America}, p.10, unpublished book on microfilm, in Box 8, Black Judaism Research, the James Landing Collection, Special Collections and University Archives, Richard J. Daley Library, University of Illinois at Chicago. (Note: at the time the author visited the University of Illinois’ special collections department, professor Landing’s “Black Judaism” research had yet to be officially catalogued. Its placement in the university archives may possibly have changed by the time the reader conducts a more thorough investigation.)} Dobrin’s map is interesting in that it includes a number of features pertinent to the establishment of particularly African American forms of Jewish, Hebrew and Israelite identities. He accounts for Jewish migrations into east Africa during ancient times by tracing extant traditions of an Africana Jewish migration through Egypt and into east Africa through Ethiopia and into central Africa through the Sudanese desert. He also documents the existence of ancient trans-Saharan trade routes that may have been utilized to facilitate the movement of Jewish populations across the continent. Finally, he provides an account of the major trans-Atlantic slave trade movements from central and western Africa. Regardless of the vast differences in time frame between his projected ancient migrations and modern human trafficking networks, Dobrin uses the map in order to suggest the possibility of the existence of an African Jewish Diaspora. If such a Diaspora existed, then one could presume that African American Jews’ accounts of their historicity
might have more basis in established fact. Again, presenting the plausibility of such facts was Dobrin’s explicit purpose in the construction of this rather linear cartography.

Creating cartographic lineages of Afro-Jews is a practice that continues in the present day, and it is not limited to the efforts of those outside the African American Jewish communities of our concern. The communities themselves have participated in this enterprise, albeit for different purposes. As far as the study of black Jewry is concerned, however, some of the most detailed efforts at locating African American Jews came at the hands of James Landing, the former professor of geography at the University of Illinois at Chicago. In the following maps, one sees Landing’s attempts to construct a cartographic lineage of African American Jewry by considering the possibilities of black migration from Africa to the Americas. The site of authenticity which serves as the basis of these constructions is the assumption of a static, ontic form for two groups of Jews Landing presumes historical: “Moorish Jews” and “Falashas.” He is explicit that his maps are “tentative hypothetical explanations” and not proof of “actual linkages.”

475 For an example, see Ben Ammi, God, The Black Man and Truth (Washington: Communicators, 2000), ii. Immediately inside the cover of the year 2000 edition, two pages beyond the copyright listing, one will find an excellent map titled “Chronological Breakdown of the Captivities of the Nation of Israel and the Migration of the African Hebrews” that carries similar features to those we have examined here. My criticism of Ben Ammi’s map should be understood as identical to that which I am posing for other cartographies rooted in ontological notions of Afro-Jewish historical presence.


477 Ibid., 1.
Figure 6.1: First Map of Possible Afro-Jewish Diaspora by James Landing
Figure 6.2: Second Map of Possible Afro-Jewish Diaspora by James Landing
Figure 6.3: Third Map of Possible Afro-Jewish Diaspora by James Landing
In the first such map (Figure 6.1), Landing proposes that Africans migrating along the Niger River in Africa could have converted to Judaism as a result of Ethiopian and Moorish migrations into that region. Such people could then have been captured in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and thereby brought traditions of Jewish descent to the Americas. Landing’s opinion of this historical scenario, however, is that of being “unlikely.” The second map (Figure 6.2) specifies the particular elements of his scenario mapped out in the first diagram. In it he proposes three major lines of Afro-Jewish Diaspora to the Americas—from Gambia, Guinea & Niger region and Cabinda. In his opinion, the lineages being based in migrations from Gambia and Cabinda are unlikely, although he believes a migration from Guinea to be “possible, but direct evidence lacking.” Landing goes on to explore the possibility of a Guinea-based trafficking of African Jews to Latin America and suggests it may be related to “slaves of Jewish owners; illicit births, adoption, emancipation, conversion, emulation, miscegenation, etc.” He confesses not knowing the links of these communities with blacks in the United States, but insists that following slavery, free blacks could have migrated to the United States with traditions of a “Judaeo heritage.” The final map (Figure 6.3) is a summary of Landing’s research suggestions for tracing African

\[\text{478} \text{ Ibid.}\]
\[\text{479} \text{ Ibid., 2.}\]
\[\text{480} \text{ Ibid.}\]
\[\text{481} \text{ Ibid.}\]
\[\text{482} \text{ Ibid.}\]
American Jewry to its African roots. Therein he mentions his beliefs in the likelihood of phenomena such as miscegenation, adoption, illicit births, emancipation and conversion. (He does not explain how “illicit [interracial] births” among Jewish owners may be considered “very likely,” while “miscegenation” should be thought of as “very unlikely.”) Eventually Landing dismisses African American oral traditions of Hebrew culture and relies, almost solely, on the lack of “a single documented reference” to African Jews who were enslaved and brought to the Americas. Apparently, this makes the scenario of African Americans’ “emulation” of Europeans (read: “Jewish owners”) very likely. After all, it is the only credible historical option Landing can appeal to in order to explain or justify the apparent existence of African American Jewish traditions. Linear cartographies of Afro-Jewish historical movement were constructed in order to provide a conceptual space for the possibility of an African Jewish Diaspora. The problem, however, is that Afro-Jewish cartographies of Diaspora suffered from a number of fallacious assumptions since the earliest days of their invention. First of all, such maps assumed an ontological relationship between the living embodiments of the traditions they attempted to record and the traditions themselves. For example, the

483 Ibid. 3

484 Ibid., 1.

485 Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism, 54. I have characterized this assumption as an ontological fallacy for the reason that without the conscious act of time-suspension required for comprehending the ontic dimensions of a natural form, it is difficult to interpret the maps in accordance with their creators’ explicitly articulated purposes of relaying historical knowledge. This is precisely Gordon’s point about narrative construction. He is not arguing that one cannot experience consciousness through one’s consciousness reflecting on itself as moving through time. His point is that imaginary
cartographies suffered from a signification fallacy in the meaning of “Jewish” it posited to readers. It is no coincidence that all three maps considered thus far appealed to a connection to ancient Jewish communities for substantiation of present day claims of lineage. Ethiopian Jews were presumed to be paradigmatic for ascertaining the factual basis of credibility in drawing out a particularly African genealogy of Jewish descent. And as a result, the Afro-Jewish cartographic project suffered from another fallacy: genealogical reductionism. Admittedly, the establishment of genealogical knowledge can powerfully pose alternative renderings and understandings of traditional knowledge. However, the genealogies espoused by the cartographic projects were all premised on linear modes of transferring traditional knowledge. Although there is much to be said for posing the role biological descent plays in maintaining family traditions, it is difficult to assess the academic value of cartographically (or even genotypically) projecting biologically-based ethnic transfer back into the past for literally thousands of years. Last but not least, there was the final problem that the cartographic genealogies never sufficiently addressed: the lack of accounting for the coherency of present-day constructions of Africana Jewry. In other words, the cartographies suffered from a fallacy of relevance. The Black Jewish Studies project sufficiently presented the possibility of certain kinds of genealogical approaches to African American Jewish historicity, but it did not address why various communities of African American Jews continue to appear and at the same time, do not historically conform (even by virtue of their oral traditions) to the projections of the cartographers.

consciousness, “at the moment of assuming its being,” simply “fakes its past.” (italics mine)
This is where I think Anna Julia Cooper’s theories on human betterment have considerable merit. Although to some, her insistence on the distinction between common and extraordinary material suggests otherwise, she does not deny the importance of learning the arts and engaging in purely intellectual endeavors. Her point is that when trying to learn about the affairs that went into producing materials (or artifacts) of certain kinds, good educational praxis should take the learner’s situational context as a primary starting point for assessing the appropriateness of what is to be introduced for learning purposes. Instead of using ontological notions of what constitutes a particular historical appearance, she suggests that the educator must allow the situated knowledge(s) of the learner to inform the most appropriate path to take in one’s investigation.\footnote{Cooper, \textit{A Voice from the South}, 259.} Her position, therefore, recognizes difference in terms of hierarchy and privilege, but she insists the hierarchy implicit in her value theory is not one that favors an ontological, status-based elitism. Rather, hers is an elitism based on achievement and labor. In her system of elitism, the persons embodying the everyday, common tasks and talent would gladly work together in providing the conditions necessary for the emergence of a few people with more “bookish” inclinations and interests.\footnote{Ibid., 262.} Translated, this means that interpreters of African American Hebrew artifacts must be very careful in their attempts to reconstruct the historical events surrounding the survival of artifactual materials. It would be easy, given the taken-for-granted meanings that tend to permeate religious traditions, to assume that Jewish religious symbols having a particular meaning in one
historical context have the same meaning in another context. But this is not necessarily so. And according to her it is not that all hierarchical arrangements and ontological impositions (such as locating, mapping and typologizing African American Jewish origins) are intrinsically problematic. They simply do not contribute to human values. When applied to the investigation of human artifacts, she appears to argue that extraordinary contributions to human values will, of their own accord, reflect the amount of work and labor that went into the process of making the world a better place.488

![Marriage License](image)

**Figure 7: Marriage Record of Sol Isaacs and Pauline Dottenheim**

Consider the artifact above. It is a copy of a marriage license documented and certified in the late 19th century southern United States. It was found in the “white”

488 Ibid., 284, esp. her criticism of Christian apologetics articulated in the absence of valuable Christian men.

489 This public document may be found in the “White” section of the “Marriage Records” section of the primary documents vault in the Barbour County courthouse annex in Clayton, Alabama. The records are maintained by a large index that separately classifies the documents according to years, last name and race. The year is 1891, the relevant last names are “Isaac” and “Dottenheim” and the race is “White.”
section of an Alabama courthouse’s record of marriage licenses. Upon reading it, contemporary readers may immediately notice the hegemonic status of Christian religious parlance. (“To any ordained or licensed Minister of the Gospel…”) Yet, it is clear that the parties in this marriage event, “Sol Isaacs” and “Pauline Dottenheim,” were not Christian, at least not in the ordinary religious sense of the term. They were clearly either Jews or had some connection to Judaism such as Jewish ancestry at least by virtue of the groom’s given names and surnames. More evidence for the claim that they had some connection to Judaism is found in the lower right hand corner of the document. The certificate is signed by the person who conducted the marriage ceremony—the “Rev. Dr. R. Farber, Rabbi.” Observations such as these constitute what I have called above notae or public notations of human presence. In the act of comprehending the word “rabbi,” the notae itself constitutes an act of consciousness that chooses to engage public realms of knowledge. Traditionally, other historical notations support an “earlier” act of comprehension, and that act of comprehension supports another one, and so on. And together these are presumed to constitute a chain of signification leading one back to more primordial forms of knowledge and/or understanding. For example, there are other documents indicating that Rabbi Farber was indeed a Jewish rabbi who served communities in the United States in the late 19th century.490 Because of the explicit use of rabbinic parlance in reference to the parties involved, documents such as these, when

placed alongside the document above, would have in the past constituted material evidence that the parties involved were Jews. In Cooper’s words, such artifacts would have traditionally been considered “faultless.” They would have been faultless in the sense that the material used to construct the relevant historical narrative would have required a minimal amount of labor in order to extract the information the object indicates about the past. In the case of this marriage license, if one were attempting to demonstrate the notion that two persons, Sol Isaacs and Pauline Dottenheim, were Jews who married in 1891 in Barbour County of the state of Alabama, then this document would exemplify artifactual evidence of that notion. The evidentiary value of the document is related to its ability to communicate public matters of common knowledge. The more readily understandable the language of the world that produced the document, the easier it is to understand the document as evidence of a Jewish historical appearance. In the case of this marriage certificate, its interpretability as a “Jewish artifact” is therefore largely dependent on people who would consider the “rabbi” to be indicative of Jewish presence. There is a way, in other words, to interpret this artifact such that “rabbi” operates as a faultless signal. The signal sent to the observing historian can be a tacit permission to treat the artifact as both common knowledge and historical evidence of ontological Jewishness. After all, if it were not a matter of common knowledge that rabbis serve particularly Jewish communities, then it is debatable whether or not this

491 Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, 240.

492 Ibid., 233-234, esp. Cooper’s insistence that a process of settling the value of raw materials apparently *precedes* that of assessing the impact of one’s workmanship on that materials.
document would as easily be understood as a specifically Jewish artifact. In other words, this artifact relies on a chain of signification to be understood as evidence of an ontologized history. Without such a framework, it is difficult to perceive much distinction between this document as a specific artifactual reality and it as a random, material entity serving another function.

A distinction should be made here between “signal,” as I am using the term, and “symbol.” For artifacts to function symbolically requires unhinging them from any predetermined system of ontologized relations.\(^{493}\) Ignoring the difference between signals and symbols leaves the theorist and researcher vulnerable to ontological fallacies such as signification itself. In the words of Ernst Cassirer

> All the phenomena which are commonly described as conditioned reflexes are not merely very far from but even opposed to the essential character of human symbolic thought. Symbols—in the proper sense of this term—cannot be reduced to mere signals. Signals and symbols belong to two different universes of discourse: a signal is a part of the human world of meaning. Signals are “operators”; symbols are “designators.” Signals, even when understood and used as such, have nevertheless a sort of physical or substantial being; symbols have only a functional value.\(^{494}\)

For our purposes, the functional value here refers to a choice to affirm the ordinariness of human agency into narratives of African American pasts. After all, if an African


American religious practice helps reintroduce Africana humanity back into the realm of the symbolic, then any interpretation of its religious artifacts may involve an ordinary effort to reintroduce them into the realm of the symbolic. Symbolic artifacts—that is, artifacts as manifestations of symbolic life—need not be bound to an ontologized chain of signification in which one artifactual object “fits” in relation to a constellation of other artifactual objects. Artifacts as symbols may indicate a slew of simultaneous meaning-contents in a single act of reflection on the artifactual object.495 In Cooper’s words, because symbolic artifacts may demand more “labor” in order for their evidentiary value to be revealed, assessments of their importance should not ignore their impact on human being.

Each is under a most sacred obligation not to squander the material committed to him, not to sap its strength in folly and vice, and to see at least that he delivers a product worthy the labor and cost which have been expended on him. A sound manhood, a true womanhood is a fruit which the lowliest can grow. And it is a commodity of which the supply never exceeds the demand… Our money, our schools, our governments, our free institutions, our systems of religion and forms of creeds are all first and last to be judged by this standard: what sort of men and women do they grow [italics mine]?496

495 Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, 63-65; Gordon appears in *Of Divine Warning* to be using Fanon’s phenomenology as a basis to understand effecting the symbolic transformations mentioned by Susan Langer. See Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 41, 44-46.

496 In this reading, I am taking Cooper’s use of symbol and asserting it as intentionally integral to her pedagogical goals. See Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, 281-282.
If my interpretation of Cooper’s exhortations is correct, she is insisting that theories of the human sciences should be evaluated on the potential for those theories to produce human beings of high moral and practical caliber. Because the social problems engendered by oppression are products of human sentiment, the standard of evaluating human worth must be considered integral to all human institutions, and if one wants to make the human world better, then one needs to use a standard that is universal to humanity. This is why Cooper expands her observation to include “our money, our schools, our governments, our free institutions, our systems of religion and forms of creeds.”

I contend that Cooper would gladly add “theories of history” and “theories of human value” to the list above, particularly given the fact that historians must constantly decide how to improve the human value of their artifactual materials. It is for this reason that symbolic artifacts are pertinent to humanizing the study of colonized, enslaved and trafficked Jewish populations. In other words, to focus on the human dimensions of historiographic work amongst Jews necessarily raises methodological questions about the relationship of that work to historical dimensions of the humanistic Jewish sciences. (Think here of the parallel between white females as feminists, black males as antiracists and the historian as scientist.)497 Likewise, if the work of the historian is improved by attempting to make it more humane, then the relationship between this more human

497 Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 65-67; what I contend here is true when researchers understand subaltern artifacts as connotative objects and they confuse those objects’ “sign-functions” with their “symbol-functions”; Gordon uses an example of subaltern artifacts in the case of Carol Pateman’s exploration of *terra nullius*. See Gordon, *Of Divine Warning*, 75-76.
historiography and other humane sciences has profound implications for what constitutes rigorous work in the human sciences in general. For example, a survey of most college libraries will quickly demonstrate that European and North American-trained academic writers on Judaism and Jewish history usually work with a largely similar set of assumptions about Jewish identities and religions. But the problem with this understanding is its largely uncritical assumption that ontological Jewishness is the legitimating norm for a scholarly investigation of Africana Jewry.

With these thoughts in mind, let us reconsider the marriage record of Sol Isaac and Pauline Dottenheim. What if there was no reference to a rabbi in the document? Or what if being a rabbi did not at all constitute an indication of Jewish historical presence? What if rabbis were “Christian” clergy? Would this mean Sol and Pauline were not Jewish? If so, what difference would it make if the couple were people of color? Would it make any difference at all? If so, to whom would it make a difference? For our research to have the impact on human being recommended by Anna Julia Cooper, it appears that new relationships to concepts such as “evidence” and “object” in the artifactual study of human beings may be required.\footnote{For a hint on how to proceed with regard to these matters of evidential constraint and material relevance to historical construction, see Alison Wylie, \textit{Thinking from Things: Essays in the Philosophy of Archaeology} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 192. Wylie’s approach to addressing the concerns about the influence of bias in scientific practices which emerge from a feminist standpoint parallel Gordon’s reflections on the same. She insists that a humanistic science is possible by virtue of it remaining empirical without collapsing into a narrow empiricism. Likewise, Gordon argues in Fanon and the Crisis of European Man that postcolonial sciences can reflect on essences without subscribing to narrow essentialism.} As one may see by the next artifact, these post-ontological considerations constitute the symbolic approaches to artifacts needed in the study of colonized peoples such as African American Jewry.
This second material artifact is similar to the first marriage record. But upon closer inspection, one notices some significant differences between them. Like the first marriage license, the document above records the interaction of Jim-Crow era persons in the Deep South. It takes place in Barbour County, Alabama and also involves a marriage. But unlike the first one, this marriage record was found in the “colored” section of the

499 This public document may be found listed among the “Colored” marriages in the “Marriage Records” section of the primary documents vault in the Barbour County courthouse annex in Clayton, Alabama. The records are maintained by a large index that separately classifies the documents according to years, last name and race. The year is 1891, the relevant last names are “Isaac” and “Davis” and the race is “Colored.”
same courthouse’s official document collection. The two records are only six years apart, and there are some basic commonalities between them. The hegemonic presence of Christian language is found in both, for example. (“To any licensed Minister of the Gospel in regular communion with the Christian Church…”) But because of the presence of such language, this marriage record appears to simply document the marriage of two members of a non-white “Christian Church,” although an individual named “Judge Davis” performed the marriage ceremony and afterwards signed the document as “of’g [or “officiating”] minister.” The problem with the assumption of the married parties’ Christian identity is that the language used in this particular artifact does not accurately represent the spiritual traditions and/or religious heritages of the parties involved. According to the parties’ children, both “Jonas Isaac” and “Mary Davis” were Jews of color who were estranged from relatives who could pass as white Jewish Americans. Unlike Jews who could pass as white, therefore, the public record in Jonas’s and Mary’s case contains no textual indication of their connectedness to the religion of Judaism. As scholars of African American religion know, record keeping and the maintenance of localized oral traditions are not always easily found in the cases of people who were slaves. In many instances, this is true for their descendants as well. In

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500 Full disclosure: The persons mentioned in this document are relatives of the author. Exemplifying my point about the hermeneutics of suspicion one may apply to archival documentations of black people’s thinking during periods of colonial rule, the document displays a prominent typo. My Palestinian Jewish great grandfather’s actual name was “Jonah,” not “Jonas.” This need not be a mere typographical error. As a practicing polygamist who spoke English with a strong accent, Jonah may not have been beyond using aliases in order to traverse his way through United Statesean society. Anyone who has conducted genealogical research knows that such mistakes are common enough to be unsurprising. The point is that excavating archives for “faultless” material under these circumstances yields questionable results at best and new social problems at worst.
years past, when scholars found evidence of contradictory traditions such as that indicated by the second marriage license, they insisted that a return to the archaeological aspects of African American history might correct some of the signification fallacies made in the various documentations of black people. The problem with this approach, however, was not long in being realized.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 9: Paramaribo Sephardic Cemetery**

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501 This was the conclusion of Anthony Pinn’s research on African American religion in the 1990’s, a method he dubbed “nitty-gritty hermeneutics.” Anthony B. Pinn, Varieties of African American Religious Experience (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 195-199, esp. his call for a hermeneutics of suspicion with respect to scholarly endorsements of ontologically Christian categories in research on African American religious experiences. For a more recent attempt at this approach, see Anthony Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 136-142, 158. Pinn recommends an approach to the study of black religion that is consonant with that of the present dissertation.

Figure 10: Mt. Carmel Missionary Baptist Church

The attempt to study African American Jewry’s religious and cultural practices through grounding it in an archaeological method revealed its deficiencies as soon as it became clear that a similar hermeneutical predicament faced both the field artifacts of archaeological research and the documentary artifacts of archival research. Although revealing many dimensions of African Americans’ past, the contradictions characterized by archival search for documentation remained, even when research was extended to include archaeological sites.

Consider the pictures (Figure 9 and Figure 10) above. For this thought experiment, I am not as concerned with the photographs, per se, as with the archaeological significance of the geographical spaces each photograph records. The picture on the left was taken in Paramaribo, Suriname. The one on the right was taken at the site of a church (now demolished) near Cocoa, Florida. What both photographs share is their relationship to “colored” burial grounds. The former was taken near a

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503 Mt. Carmel Missionary Baptist Church, 3670 West Railroad Avenue, City Point, FL, circa 1955 (actual date of original photograph unknown). Personal collection of author.

504 The location of the former (left) is Paramaribo, Surinam. (Courtesy, Rachel Frankel, AIA Architecture, New York.) The location of the latter (right) is Cocoa, Florida. (private collection, Walter Isaac)
burial facility for black and mixed-race descendants of the Jewish colony, while the latter is a church (long-since demolished) marking the presence of a cemetery for slaves and their descendants. Both sites have African American Jews buried on them, yet only one is considered a “Jewish” cemetery, per se. The Surinamese cemetery, for example, is connected to an old Sephardic congregation found in Paramaribo. In its case, the “faultless” status as a Jewish artifact is indicated in part by the Star of David being left on many of the head markers. But the cemetery behind the church contains many marked and unmarked graves. Both of these burial grounds were sites of racial signification—one for “Jewish,” the other for “colored” persons. Neither one has been thoroughly investigated for their evidence of specifically Afro-Jewish historical presences. One might even pose the question of whether such a project is possible, given the disciplinary constraints of dominant trends in Jewish archaeological work. For example, although the cemetery on the left was deemed a “Jewish” cemetery, Rachel Frankel, the architect who took the original photography, noted identical African style head markings in the “Creole” or mixed cemetery as was found in the official Jewish cemetery. It was established apart from the official Jewish cemetery, which also may have contained mixed-raced persons buried within it, and it clearly includes evidence of the burial of creolized persons. So like the archival documents such as the Jewish marriage records we examined earlier, these examples demonstrate that access to public notations of


506 Ibid., 430-433.

507 Ibid., 425.
Jewish presence in archaeological research, while easier to find, may not necessarily yield the most accurate information about the history of a Jewish community. It turns out that in the cases of both pictures, verifying the possible Hebrew ancestry of any non-white persons interred could only be found out by an act of world-constitution: contacting the local population of color. World-constituting in this manner has not always been easy, as these populations have often transmitted Jewish, Hebrew and Israelite identities to their descendants in symbolic form—that is, by affirming their humanity in ways that would help them survive multiple layers of oppression and discrimination. But in such cases, it was only by embracing these populations that the historical and symbolic meanings of artifacts sustained by non-white American Jewry could appear to outsiders. These traditions continue into the present day.

Consider the following depictions of two houses of worship for two contemporary, predominantly African American communities of faith.

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508 It is highly uncertain whether the archaeologists and volunteers who have preserved remnants of Suriname’s colonial Jewish community would have questioned the racial makeup of that community without the presence of people of color who, until the present day, claim descent from the Jewish forebears of the colony. See Roger Bastide, *African Civilizations in the New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 49-51. Bastide states quite plainly that among the Surinamese Djuka populations are Jewish communities who descend from maroons colonies forged from the presence of Jewish plantation life in Dutch Guyana.

509 Aviva Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America: A Diasporic History* (New York: New York University, 2009), 188-189, 192: Ben-Ur is explicit about her belief that Jews of color have been “either entirely ignored or relegated to a tangential remark” in contemporary American Jewish scholarship.” She is also adamant that the problem in the professional research of Jewish communities of color is not ignorance of their existence, but rather “the failure to consider them a legitimate part of American Jewish history and community.” Her recommendations to address this problem lay, therefore, in “viewing the past from their perspective.”
These two congregations’ buildings are located in New Haven, CT. I have chosen to focus on them, because together they exemplify an architectural problem for the constructor of Afro-Judaism, a problem that parallels the hermeneutical barriers.

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encountered in interpreting documentary and archaeological artifacts. There are some pertinent facts about these two congregations that should be borne in mind. Originally the congregations were united and assembled for worship in the Beers Street (lower left) location. The congregations share the exact same name. They are both known as the “Church of God and Saints of Christ.” This name is shared for a variety of reasons related to their historical emergence. These congregations have quite a bit in common. They were at one time a single congregation that worshipped together. But today, the congregations have little to do with each other, institutionally speaking. They each have their own, independent structures of authority to contend with. Yet one of them (below) understands itself as a “Christian” congregation and the other one (above) shuns that label. The congregation represented by the two pictures on top practices “Judaism.”514 Both congregations, however, practice a Saturday Sabbath-observance and a variety of other religious traditions found in the Hebrew scriptures. They are so similar, in fact, that because of their common history, the congregations have divided even the families of the members contained therein. Some members of a particular family may attend one congregation, while other members of the exact same extended family attend another. However, the members of each congregation have traditionally not been allowed to worship alongside the other, despite the presence of intercongregational families


populating the pews of each one. With this background of dividing the congregations between Jewish and non-Jewish members, it would seem that a historian could easily distinguish between them. But for the very reasons mentioned, such an enterprise can be profoundly difficult. On the right I have focused on two prominent features of the exteriors of each building. The listing of religious services occurs on the exterior of both buildings. (It is on the right side of the entrance of the building on the lower left.) Both signs stated similar service times on the Saturday Sabbath and mentioned the names of their religious leaders. I have focused on the listing times for religious services in the case of the Jewish congregation, because the Jewish congregation’s sign does not indicate anything explicitly “Jewish” or particularly rabbinic, at least not anything that it does not share with its historical counterpart. On the other hand, the “Christian” congregation’s building has an architectural symbol that is, from at least one micro-institutional perspective, accepted as a “faultless” indication of “Jewish” identity: a stained glass Star of David. However, it is reasonable to assume that the Christian congregation would shun any unjustified labeling of it as a “Jewish” congregation (or at least one that practices the religion of “Judaism”). I have pointed out these two congregations in order to demonstrate how the traditional academic move from an archaeological approach to the interpretation of Afro-Jewish historical material to that of a genealogical-cartographical approach still does not address some basic ambiguities of reference easily documented in present-day African American Jewish religious life. These two communities of faith represent, in many respects, the intra-familial, micro-institutional religious diversity one may find in various American Jewish communities. In their case, one is simply not justified in constructing a line of descent from Palestine, through Africa
and, via the slave trade, into the Americas. This is not to say such traditions did not survive or occur. It is clear they did. The historiographic point, however, is very different. Methodologically, historians cannot account for the emergence of African American Jewry by imposing ontological forms of Jewishness onto the assumptions driving their accumulation of artifactual knowledge. Jewish symbols as such do not fit neatly into a natural, ontic form of sign relations. They can and do emerge in novel, unexpected ways amidst ordinary human life. In the case of the two congregations above, it is highly debatable whether or not certain members of the “Christian” congregation would have reason to understand their Star of David as anything other than a Christian symbol. And to the phobogenic ire of those espousing cartographic lineages of descent as proof of Afro-Jewish historicity, the same may be said vice versa.

Phenomenologically speaking, a number of interesting questions regarding the nature, meaning and eidetic structures of “Jewish artifacts” emerges at this point. Is it possible, one may ask, that the acquisition of African American Jewish artifacts is an illegitimate enterprise? Are attempts to collect and preserve African American Jewish historical material too ambitious a project?

As stated above, artifacts rely on common knowledge for them to be interpreted as evidence. Common knowledge is an important aspect of world-constitution. It is the faith that agreements which guide acts of world-constitution are based on the lived-experiences of human existence. Common knowledge presumes that, regardless of tradition or prejudice, matters of scholarly rigor concerning the human sciences will take

Among the author’s own relatives were Jews who came to the United States from Palestine.
as relevant the lived-experiences of human beings before imposing ontological understandings onto a given state of affairs. Without that common knowledge framework, then the interpretation of artifacts as evidence of a particular narration of past events makes little sense. Think, for example, about the problems encountered in researching the “Isaac” family marriages documented above. At first one might think that a simple appeal to the document trail would be sufficient to establish which Jews in the 19th century were married and whom they married as well. But when investigating the Isaac family, a historian must assume the traditional resources of common knowledge may be inadequate. Although it is probably justifiable to assume that at the time few white rabbis would have performed a marriage ceremony for people of color, there is a more significant observation to be made here: historical accounts, public records and other notae of African Americans’ religious rituals often simply did not accurately represent black people’s actual spiritual beliefs and practices. In this respect, my reflections on the marriage documents should not be understood as atypical phenomena in the investigation of African American religious and cultural reality. The common

517 The reader should note how in my understanding, it is not the case that ontology serves no purpose at all in the human sciences. My position insists that in the study of humanity, the recognition that living human beings have and experience an inner life should compel responsible researchers to suspend their ontological commitments before attempting to represent and/or explain human reality.

knowledge for understanding African American Hebrew history is that publicly accessible information about their existence is almost certainly distorted—so much so that all inscriptions of African American Hebrew presence should necessarily stimulate a critical outlook on the contours and ordinariness of the particular Jewish identities being investigated. The implications of moving one’s methodological stance, therefore, from that of assuming the mundanity of people’s public articulation of their own self-understanding to that of assuming the mundanity of people’s public silence regarding their own self-understandings demands a radical adjustment in how one positively interprets artifacts. It demands an approach to the study of artifacts that assumes the presence of a theodicean mode of moving through human history, a mode of sociality that presumes that when one appears in public, how one appears will inevitably be distorted and skewed by others due to the common prejudices of the dominant society in which one lives.

If Anna Julia Cooper’s recommendations are of any value in addressing this problem, which is actually the social problem of artifactual interpretation, then her statements regarding the relationship between labor and raw materials seem to stand out. Producing and establishing a new, more adequate and scholarly “common knowledge” for the interpretation of Jewish artifacts is not impossible. It simply requires more labor than has been exercised in the past. If one “works” those materials with the requisite amount of labor necessary, then a better appreciation and understanding of human beings should emerge. If not, then learning will be minimal. The works of Fanon and Gordon in particular are characterized by an acute attention to this problem. Their writings contain concrete phenomenological descriptions of instances in which social realities such as
African American Jewish life-worlds have been deformed through the uncritical introduction of racial ontologies into research claiming to accurately represent their perspectives and viewpoints. In scholarship such as historical writings, the incorporation of such ontologies into one’s research can produce readings of Jewish history that are exemplified by the limitations of the documentary, archaeological and cartographic-genealogical approaches mentioned thus far. As an alternative to these methods, each of which relies on a form of ontological Jewishness in order to be conclusive, postcolonial phenomenologists such as Fanon and Gordon insist on the need to investigate the role of objective, material reality in the construction of what Sartre calls the “us” and the “We.” In other words, they demand that one pay close attention to what happens in the social world when attempts are made to construct ontological histories that may bind certain peoples together or segregate them from others in unpredictable and sometimes unjustified ways.

In a chapter from Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism titled “How is Bad Faith Possible?” Gordon addresses the complex relationship between material reality and the seemingly necessary attitudes of self-deception characteristic of bad faith. In that segment he attempts to account for features of imaginative constructions that are,

519 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 536-537.

520 Gordon, Fanon and the Crisis of European Man, 23: “For both [the masochist and sadist], institutional bad faith furnishes ‘causal’ or ‘material’ explanations of the social, of the human. The world that emerges is, then, the world of the living dead, the comfortable, ‘happy’ slave—the being who is a determined consequence of ‘nature.’” Also see Gordon, Her Majesty’s Other Children, 43-44.

521 Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism, 50-58.
according to my interpretation, involved in deciphering Jewish artifacts. First, insists Gordon, consciousness behaves such that “pre-reflection may sometimes lack the distinctness of reflection.”\(^{522}\) Images, in simple terms, are more vague than perceptions.

Second, “the immediacy of pre-reflection” makes possible what he calls the “somewhat.”\(^{523}\) Because images do not rely on the presence of a natural object to sustain their appearance to consciousness, they inhabit a realm of immediacy not incumbent upon the perception of natural objects. The “somewhat,” therefore, is that initial ambiguity one experiences based on pre-reflective, imaginative meaning contents. It is the liminal moment in which clarity and distinction must arise for reflective consciousness. It is a moment of believing that which is based on the imaginary self-positings of consciousness. (Think here of my initial response to the black caretaker of the synagogue. My belief in his Jewish identity represented a kind of “somewhat” moment.) For my purposes, I want to pose to the reader a necessary and sufficient condition for the advancement of all research in the human sciences: that every artifactual object one encounters entails the emergence of “somewhat” moments in regards to whether or not that particular artifact may be said to constitute “evidence.”\(^{524}\) Artifacts as such do not necessarily comprise evidence of human presence. Alternatively, whether or not one believes the distinction between artifacts and natural kinds is, in fact, artifactual, it seems clear that evidence as such is not a natural feature of natural objects. Evidence is

\(^{522}\) Ibid., 52.

\(^{523}\) Ibid.

\(^{524}\) Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence*, 29-33.
a result of thinking characterized by a process of critical inquiry. It is not “an appearance
that stimulates thought but a form of thought that stimulates appearance.” Thoughts
that stimulate appearances are inherently capable of negation. For any object to appear to
human consciousness, therefore, requires our ability to distinguish it from other aspects
of awareness with which the object might be confused or associated.\footnote{Ibid., 21.}
In specifying the nature of this negative moment of consciousness, Gordon reiterates an argument made in
prior generations by Jean-Paul Sartre. According to Sartre, the negation attendant to the
“somewhat” moment could be said to indicate the actual structure of pre-reflective
consciousness as imagination.\footnote{Ibid., 52.}

Although consciousness always requires an object of consciousness, there is an endless array of imaginative (and
emotive) attitudes toward the object. These imaginative attitudes come about through the many manifestations of negating—
questioning, erroring, hating, fearing, interpreting.

...And finally to interpret [the object], I have to be able to advance its possibilities. Without these possibilities in my relation
to the object, I would not only never make false, hateful, or fearful judgments regarding the object, but I would also never be able to choose how I look at the object or whether I would look at the
object at all.\footnote{Ibid., 52-53.}
The simple act of imagining requires a transcendental compossibility of consciousness’ object-negation. In short, to literally “see” an image requires “seeing” what the image is not. But “seeing” an image is not like seeing a natural object. The image comes from consciousness. Consciousness creates the image. In effect this means that negations of the image, what the image is not, also emerge from consciousness. Consciousness is not only aware of images it creates; it is aware of those it does not. In the words of Gordon, “one can be aware of what one does not know.” What one knows supervenes on what one does not know. It appears that the phenomenon of choice also requires such a transcendental condition of possibility. In phenomena such as focusing one’s attention on composing music or writing a story, the act of focusing is an imaginary one premised on the possibility of consciousness negating its conscious awareness into a vague assemblage of background stimuli. To exemplify consciousness’ role in the imaginative negation of objects, Gordon uses an instance of composing a story.

Suppose we are asked by our intruder what we are doing. We explain that we are composing a short story and as it turns out are doing so by way of writing it down on paper. We show our work thus far to our intruding friend, who is marveled by our originality and who asks,

“Where did you get such an idea?”

What sort of an answer can we provide that would constitute an accurate description of the source of our story in progress? He demands a causal explanation. But would it be accurate to say that the story came to us? Is it that we simply detach ourselves from

529 Ibid., 53.

530 Ibid., 57.

531 Ibid., 54.
our surroundings and wait for stories to “leap into our heads,” as it were? Such formulations are ruled out of the philosophy of existence that we have assumed here.\\footnote{532}

The narratives that may be constructed around historical artifacts do not, therefore, leap into the heads of historians. Even in the case of interpreting “faultless” symbols such as Stars of David built into the sides of buildings, “the philosophy of existence that we have assumed here” highlights the possibility that when misinterpreted as fixed, natural signals, artifacts may still be used to constellate ontological histories of colonized peoples. Historians must therefore engage in a process of critical inquiry, ruling out possibilities and imaginatively posing and re-posing situations to themselves and others, before the historical meaningfulness of an artifact as “evidence” of a particular narrative emerges.\\footnote{533} Because of its essential role in consciousness’ acts of negation, Sartre describes the image as an “unreal” phenomenon of consciousness. The fleeting nature of the image therefore constitutes proof of its essentially negative content.\\footnote{534} Gordon, however, disagrees with Sartre’s conclusion.\\footnote{535} Instead he insists that images have an eidetic structure that may be elucidated and understood, despite their seeming independence from a particular structure of any kind. If this is the case, then consciousness may engage in a process of critical reflective inquiry with the eidetic structural invariants of imaginative meaning-contents functioning as the site of objective

\\footnote{532} Ibid.

\\footnote{533} Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence*, 32.


\\footnote{535} Ibid., 53: “An image cannot be a pure nothing.”
reflection. In other words, the logical consequence of our depiction of human consciousness here is that thinking is possible—that is, it may freely choose to carry on intelligent, self-deliberative exchanges about meaning-contents of the imagination without those contents appearing in the state of a natural, ontic form.

With these meta-reflections on thought in mind, we may now return to our discussion of specifically Jewish artifacts. As we have seen, Gordon argues that the ontological limitations of imaginal reality constitute the transcendental possibilities for the phenomenological-historical emergence of a choice. This is particularly true because “in the imaginative act the world is displaced. For unlike perception, where consciousness encounters the object and is regarded by Sartre as being in a passive condition, the image is presented in the imaginative act by consciousness.” If imagining is an act of consciousness performed on itself as well as its meaning-contents (or the object to which it is responding), then let us “imagine” what would take place if the object being referred to was an artifact of African American Jewish history. It seems that according to this account of the ontological limitations of affective/imaginal reality, whether or not the object can be understood as an “artifact” or “evidence” at all is entirely contingent on how one chooses to observe or otherwise perceive it.

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538 Ibid., 53.

539 Ibid.

540 Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence*, 32.
presented the reader with an artifact above, a picture of two congregations located in New Haven, CT. However, I made descriptions about them that could be construed as “evidence” of a particular history of the African American Jewish community of New Haven. Yet it should be clear by now that because you, the reader, saw my artifact does not at all mean that you saw evidence of any historical narrative in particular. “I just saw two random pictures of buildings,” you could say. In that case, in order for those pictures to be transformed into evidence of a historical situation like that which I transcribed, you must subject them to a form of critical inquiry in which other aspects of your knowledge confirm the “evidence” of that historical narrative, at least as it appears through the artifact. Gordon’s insight is that it seems difficult to separate this more primordial knowledge from what I have thus far called “common knowledge.” It also seems difficult to maintain that this knowledge is not imaginary in content, particularly during the moment it is held up to critical inquiry.541 Furthermore, it would be an error to assume that common knowledge is always a site of affirmation (or affirmed alterity). Knowledge, regardless of the amount of evidence amassed in its favor, can be freely denied.542 Recognition of this fact, for example, is what Gordon is up to when he emphasizes the bad faith dimensions of evading evidence:

In sum, weak bad faith is a convenient context—group denial—for individuals to hide from themselves. “There is no white-man conspiracy in the United States,” a white man may declare. But as

541 Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism, 53.
542 Ibid., 48.
we shall see, a black man can respond, “True. But that doesn’t mean that antiblack racism is an accidental feature of the United States.”

When presented with the evidence that African American Jews worship in an urban synagogue located in New Haven, CT, researchers could choose to use that evidence to cultivate a greater understanding of artifacts related to that situation or they could choose to ignore it. Yet the choice to ignore artifacts that could be interpreted as evidence remains. A decision to embrace a weak denial of Africana Jewish historical artifacts is a decision nonetheless. An appeal to ignorance in the form of lacking “clues” is of no assistance in this regard, because the comprehension of clues as such suggests a primordial understanding of a situation characterized by lingering doubts, suspicions, questions or confusion over a particular matter. Yet in our formulation, one need not have doubts or questions at all to investigate an artifactual object for gaining further evidence-based understanding. History writing, particularly the kind of writing that is characteristic in the historical study of American Jewry, involves a great deal of sheer intellectual creativity that may not be spurred on by clues or other perceptual contents at all. One need not engage the visual, aural, kinesthetic dimensions of experience in order to write history. Human beings can imagine situations devoid of perceptual data. We can create narratives of “how” something is the case or “that” something is, without positing the definitive perceptual content of such acts at all.

543 Ibid.

544 Ibid., 55.
The upshot of this argument is that there has been functioning in Jewish historiography, at least the historiography of the kind represented by archival, archaeological and genealogies inquiries into African American Jewry/Judaism, a confusion between phenomenalist readings of artifacts and phenomenological readings of the same. What passes for phenomenological rigor in the interpretation of Jewish artifacts may, in fact, be phenomenal forms of bad faith. The writers of American Jewish history have all too often confused the passive role of perceiving “Jewish artifacts” with the active role of researchers who create historical narratives from pre-reflective acts of consciousness and the critical inquiry attendant to phenomenological readings of evidence. The evasion of critical inquiry through the scholarly neglect of reflective and pre-reflective dimensions of consciousness in the discernment of Afro-Jewish artifactual evidence indicates the presence of an academic bias toward investigations of Jewish social reality solely from micro-institutional, as opposed to macro-institutional, standpoints. The adoption of micro-institutional standpoints in the unilateral signification of historical raw materials as “Jewish artifacts,” therefore, aids in the perpetuation of ontological accounts of African American Jews’ historical appearance and disappearance. This observation is particularly important if we are to take as instructive Du Bois’ cautionary notes against the social problems of the human

545 Ibid., 53.

546 Gordon, Disciplinary Decadence, 32-33. In various places, Gordon describes bad faith as a “standpoint,” which appears to raise the possibility of a critical evidential good faith being exercised from the same. See Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism, 125, esp. his discussion of Sartre’s treatment of masculinity and femininity.
When interpreters of Jewish artifacts do not account for the role their own imaginations play in the construction of Jewish history, the conceptual foundations for ontological metanarratives are laid. Similarly, if researchers are unable to account for instances in which ontological Jewishness appears in scholarship, an endorsement of ontological Jewishness by virtue of negation can proceed unchecked. Both consequences, the positive and the negative, loom behind uncritical approaches to the study of American Jewish history.

Having successfully distinguished the artifact as object from the evidence that may be drawn from it, we now have the conceptual basis on which to engage in our second phenomenological reduction, a critical approach to examining methodological issues caused by conceptual deployments of ontological humanity. In order to further illustrate both the positive and negative consequences of ontological scholarship, I will critically interpret several personal exchanges between Dr. Bertram Korn, author of *Jews and Negro Slavery in the Old South* and rabbis in the Caribbean and Latin America. The reader should know that I am aware of the shortcomings of this approach. Focusing

547 Ibid., 33. In our instance, the particular form of disciplinary decadence mentioned by Gordon would emerge in the following construction: “I’m a scholar of Jewish Studies. Now if you want to know about black Jews, then you need to go to someone who specializes in *African American* Studies.”

548 Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antibleack Racism*, 54-55. This reading of Gordon follows from a re-interpretation of the writer in his parable as a historian who writes.

549 Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 722, 725. This reading is based on the theory of coextensivity found in the last chapter. See chapter four, Lewis Gordon, *Existentia Africana*.

on the work of an individual scholar carries the danger of ignoring the general academic
trends that may have originally given rise to the very work that is consulted. Such a
focus may easily become misread as an uncritical endorsement or indictment on a
particular author rather than an examination of the issues to which that author speaks. I
have chosen Korn’s writings, however, because his approach to the study of Jews and
American slavery has been largely influential in academic representations of the topic.\textsuperscript{551}
And given the approach to be taken in the next chapter, a closer reading of Korn’s
research methods seems appropriate.

When investigating Caribbean Jewry in 1969, Bertram Korn had been lecturing
about American Jewish history in New York City, and during one of his presentations, a
student raised their hand and asked him about blacks in the Caribbean with Jewish
surnames. At the time, Dr. Korn admitted to the student that he was not knowledgeable
about the subject but would inquire about the possibility of Afro-Jews in the Caribbean.
As a result, in May of 1969, he sent identical letters to synagogues throughout the
Caribbean: Panama, Curacao, Jamaica, St. Thomas, etc. In the letter, he informed the
congregational rabbis and other leaders of his encounter with the student and requested
information about whether or not their synagogues had any black members.\textsuperscript{552} Before
recounting that correspondence, it is important to note Korn’s initial response. He first

\textsuperscript{551} Please consult the Literature Review in chapter one for more information on this
assertion.

\textsuperscript{552} Bertram Korn letters to Caribbean rabbis and vice versa, Folder 12: “Blacks: Jewish
Blacks in the Caribbean,” Box 3, (MS-99) Bertram W. Korn Papers, Rabbis, Major
Manuscript Collections, American Jewish Archives, Hebrew Union College-Jewish
Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, Ohio.
appealed, as he was trained, to publicly Jewish institutions for information about people of color. Below we will use the approach developed thus far by Du Bois, Cooper, and Gordon to analyze the content of these letters. If successful, a postcolonial phenomenology that examines the vectors of social relations in these correspondences can reveal as much about Dr. Korn (and myself) as the Jews of color mentioned therein.

Let us begin by reading the response of Rabbi Leo M. Abrami from Curacao, dated May 14th, 1969:

Dear Dr. Korn:
…To the best of my knowledge, there is no Negro Jew in Surinam and probably in Jamaica, Panama and St. Thomas (I am however not sure of it)…

I believe there are thousands of mulattos of Jewish descent who can trace their Jewish ancestors up to four and five generations back, but there are many today who are the grand-sons and even the sons and daughters of Jews. They are usually Catholic (at least nominally) or agnostic. Many of them, no doubt, would probably consider the possibility of joining the Jewish community, if it were not for the fact that the Jews of Curacao always excluded them in the past, and would probably not mix with them anyway. Since I converted Yishmael Francisca, I have been asked three times to say a prayer at the dedication of a new home of these Antillian Anussim, and one of them, who is a member of Parliament, is studying Hebrew with me…

These facts are true, to the best of my knowledge, and I am not afraid to mention them, but the members of my community do not [underline emphasis in original] like to hear about them; they would surely prefer to ignore them. I have tried to do my best not to antagonize them with these matters but I think it would be a great injustice if they were not to be included in the general “History of the Jews in the Netherlands Antilles” which will soon be published.

With my best wishes, I am

Faithfully yours,
Rabbi Leo M. Abrami

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553 Bertram Korn letters to Caribbean rabbis and vice versa, Folder 12: “Blacks: Jewish Blacks in the Caribbean,” Box 3, (MS-99) Bertram W. Korn Papers, Rabbis, Major

226
This letter is intriguing because in addition to providing a response to Korn’s question about the lack of black membership in Caribbean synagogues, the rabbi proceeds to mention “thousands of mulattos of Jewish descent who can trace their Jewish ancestors….” Furthermore, the rabbi admits that many of them remain connected, at least in their own minds, to the Jewish community. Apparently, Rabbi Abrami was open to the possibility of them formally joining the (predominantly white) synagogue. Yet it is equally apparent that encouraging such activities would cause a stir in the white Jewish community. This is because the mulatto Jews themselves constituted evidence of the island’s troubling racial past. The majority of Curaçaoans are people of color. And if positive relations between white Jews and the island’s population of color were to be sustained, then a certain degree of racial order would have to obtain amongst the island’s multiracial Jewish community. In addition, if the darker Jews of color on the island began to appear in public as members of the Jewish community, not only would the relationship of white Jews to publicly Jewish institutions change, it stands to reason that white Jews’ relationships to each other might change. Recall that Rabbi Abrami does not indicate that the population of mulattos of Jewish descent is small. On the contrary, he writes of “thousands” of non-white people who apparently have retained significant forms of genealogical knowledge. It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that the

Manuscript Collections, American Jewish Archives, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, Ohio.

554 “Thousands” is a numerically significant number, considering the size of Curacao. The present day population of the island is only about 145,000. In the mid-1960’s it was significantly less. Given these demographics, it can be reasonably assumed that “thousands” more Jewish mulattos live on Curacao today than when these letters were originally exchanged.
appearance of black and mulatto Jews would have meant the public recognition of things such as sexual liaisons, sexual infidelity, polygamous practices (those both accepted and unaccepted) and possibly even disputes over the proper inheritance of money and property. In short, the mere presence of Jews of color constituted problems for the white Jewish communities’ ties to economic, cultural, and racial privilege. The matter was never simply about religious beliefs and practices, and this is why, despite the rabbi’s cries for justice, the members of the white Jewish community did “not like to hear about [the Jews of color]” and “would surely prefer to ignore them.”

The rabbi’s words are emblematic of the social problem of racial anonymity. Despite the common assumption that Jews should not be conceived in racial terms, the rabbi in this letter insisted that racial anonymity was not a feature of the ordinary social life of the Jews of Curaçao. According to him, the Jews of color existed in an affirmative, alteritous relation with the white Jews, while the white Jews existed in a denied alteritous relation to them. The fact that the rabbi does not seem to know many details about the personal stories of the Jews of color, yet is open to discussing their existence suggests that he himself existed in an affirmed alteritous relation to the racially “Jewish,” yet somewhat anonymous people of color on the island. However, the people of color on the island who understood and presented themselves as Jews to the rabbi did not interpret the white Jews as anonymously Jewish. White Jews were their affirmed other. This observation brings to the fore of our investigation an important dimension of researching Jewish populations—assumptions of Jewish presence. In many scientific studies of Jewish people, the identity of certain segments of Jewish humanity is assumed, whereas other groups of Jewish peoples must irrefutably assert their existence before
research can be conducted in a way that does not portray them as historically deviant. The rabbi here seems to not have wanted to portray the Curaçaoan Jews of color as deviant, although his desire led to some tension between himself and some of the synagogue’s congregants. It is additionally important to note that the rabbi’s predisposition toward affirming the Jewish alterity of racially anonymous people of color did not lead to his denied alterity from the perspective of the congregation. The congregants may have been perturbed at the rabbi’s suggestions that racial integration in the Jewish community is desirable, but he was not branded by the white Jewish community as “non-Jewish” or a non-member of their community because of those suggestions.

The reader should be aware that I, the author, am not immune to the vectors of social relations characterized by these dynamics. In the paragraph above, I have referred to the people approaching Rabbi Abrami as “Jews of color.” Whether or not the persons being referred to in the rabbi’s letter would feel comfortable with that signification is unknown to me. In all probability, or so I would guess, the response would be mixed. Some would consider themselves “Jews.” Others would not. Some might consider themselves “black” or “mulatto.” Others might not. The critical theoretical issue, however, is how the simple act of reading the letter by Rabbi Abrami places me in a critical dialogue with the situation of people of color who are the biological descendants of “Jews” or, to be more precise, those “thousands of mulattos of Jewish descent” mentioned by the rabbi. From a macro-institutional standpoint, therefore, it is not an issue that some of the Jews of color claim Jewishness on their part. Rather, the point is that I as the researcher am claiming that these people are “Jews,” both in strong and weak
senses, depending on the individual. The strong identifications of Jewishness on their part would simply emerge from their willingness to designate themselves as such. The weak senses would be necessary if the community was functioning with a set of norms that collectively constitute their world in a particular manner that transcends the strong identities of individuals. Therefore even if the people of color mentioned in Abrami’s letter do not personally self-identify as “Jews,” per se, the content of the rabbi’s letter to Korn alone indicates the existence of an on-going, institutionalized deliberation about their historical relationship to the relevant micro-institutional Jewish social realities.

From a macro-institutional perspective, Jews can exist in such a world without being literally and publicly recognized as “Jews.” They could move through history in ways that, in terms of social meaning, are virtually identical to those embodying public designations of “Jewishness,” but remain signified by a completely different term of signification, a term with a sense but no referent.\textsuperscript{555} At this point, it should be clear that the (symbolic) form of signification to which I am referring to is that of race, and in the case of Rabbi Abrami’s letter, it appears difficult to avoid endorsing one particular micro-institutional relation as superior without articulating how the symbolic form of race has mediated the affirmations and denials of sociality in Curaçao’s Jewish community. Thus I do not make this claim that self-identifying Jews of color are “Jews” out of cultural naïveté or theological bias. I do so for the same reasons most scholars would describe European Jews by simply using the word “Jews,” as opposed to calling them “Europeans” who “claim a Jewish past.” I do so to avoid the ontological signification

\textsuperscript{555} Gordon, \textit{Fanon and the Crisis of European Man}, 51.
attendant to any scholarly analysis of which racist discourse forms a critical component. It is a way of talking responsibly about the impact of race on the social world while, as a scholar, overtly distancing one’s investigative stance from the ontological assumptions of race-ism.

Eventually, Dr. Korn wrote back to Rabbi Abrami. However, the tone and substance of the response makes me pause.

Dear Rabbi Abrami:
I am deeply grateful to you for your letter of May 14th, [but]… as you may know from my paper on Jews and Slavery in the Old South, [underline in original] there is evidence that there was only one Negro who regarded himself as a Jew, a man who attended services in Charleston. Otherwise, consistently [italics mine] the Jewish fathers of Mulatto children demonstrated no interest in giving them a Jewish education, or in rearing them as Jews, or identifying them as such. It is a very, very fascinating subject indeed…

Faithfully,
Dr. Bertram W. Korn

After initially requesting information on the topic from the rabbi of Curaçao, Korn responds by reminding the rabbi of his findings on a similar topic in one of his previous books. Korn begins his response by asserting the paucity of evidence regarding “Negro” people’s self-understandings of Jewishness. He also suggests that the Jewish identity

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of the “mulatto children” of “Jewish fathers” is somehow contingent on a special relationship, such as that indicated by a certain “education” or “rearing” between their fathers and their children. (Their maternal relationships are dismissed, particularly if the women involved were not considered European. Korn may have avoided this issue in order to evade discussions about identity that made Jewish education irrelevant.) Thus there is a definitive categorical distinction Korn draws between “Negro” / “Mulatto” peoples and “Jewish” people, such that one cannot assume that blacks and mulattos are Jews—even if a biological relation is acknowledged. If one asserts blacks and mulattos as Jews, then that assertion apparently must be justified on the basis of the black and mulatto Jewish person’s special relationship to European Jewry, a relationship that is apparently patriarchal in structure. Korn also seems to think that the mere possibility of blacks and mulattos being Jews is “fascinating,” an indication that his writing may be premised on a fallacy of exoticism. Overall, Korn’s wording is difficult to interpret, but his particular arrangement of words such as “evidence,” “Negro,” “regarded himself,” “Jewish,” and “fascinating” suggests he is subjecting his analysis to a profound ontological fallacy that runs as follows: a fallacious evidentiary assessment is made on the basis of a signification fallacy that privileges the ontological segregation of Negro, Mulatto and Jewish identities. By imposing this signification onto the artifacts of members of Charleston’s Jewish community, he appears to endorse a theological fallacy that is at least understood, if not endorsed, by Rabbi Abrami. The reason, or so it

557 Note:- The basis of his assertion is subject to an evidentiary fallacy, however, because nowere in Korn’s works does he provide criteria for discerning how a Negro regards him or her self as a Jew.
appears, that Abrami would understand Korn’s theological fallacy rests as much in what he writes as what he does not write. Because the transition he makes from the theological signification (i.e.—the “Jewish fathers of Mulatto children”) to an exoticist fallacy (i.e.—the topic as “fascinating”) goes unexplained and unjustified, one might assume that Korn believed his intended meanings would be comprehensible by Abrami without much translation. It is possible that Rabbi Korn was only attempting to explain to Rabbi Abrami why the members of his community were so resistant to racially integrating the synagogue. But even if this was his purpose, his response’s peculiar use of language suggests that he was not acting as simply a collector of historical data. Specifically, Korn’s use of the word “consistently” to describe the fathers of mulatto children betrays his commitment to a racial neatness in his imagined representation of American Jewish pasts. Surely, if the fathers were not consistent in their treatment of their mulatto children, then the obvious question would entail the nature and experiences of these Africans of Jewish descent. This was a question Dr. Korn seemed content to avoid—at least in this instance. In the case of this exchange we have a great example of Gordon’s position concerning the phenomenalist’s assumed subsumption of the image into the object. Although one might assume that historians do not project their own imaginings onto their artifacts, Korn’s response to Rabbi Abrami suggests otherwise.

Consider, however, the response of the Jamaican rabbi to Korn’s inquiry

[13th May 1969]
Dear Dr. Korn,
In reply to your enquiry I would inform you that there are a few Negro and mulatto members in my Congregation. To give

558 Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism, 53.
some examples: one seems to have originated in the Harlem Community of Rabbi Wentworth Matthew; another is a boy who was recently Bar Mitzvah—he is the son of an ex-Auschwitz Polish Jewess and a Seventh-Day Adventist Negro Doctor; others (including a few Chinese) have been converted by me…

Kindest regards,
Rabbi Hooker

Clearly, the politics of race in the Jamaican congregation appear to be slightly different than that of the Curaçaoan synagogue. Not only did Rabbi Hooker convert Chinese members, someone from the Ethiopian Hebrew community in New York attended services there. His letter implies that he himself exists in an affirmative alteritous relation to “the Harlem Community of Rabbi Wentworth Matthew” as well as maternal children of Holocaust survivors, etc. The tone of Rabbi Hooker’s note, while direct, appears somewhat prideful and matter-of-fact about the racial integration of his congregation.

Rabbi Korn’s response to Rabbi Hooker, however, is just as peculiar as his response to Rabbi Abrami.

[May 19th]
My Dear Rabbi Hooker:
Your answer to my recent inquiry is much appreciated. I want to be sure I am correct in assuming [italics mine] that no one, to your knowledge, has been a Jamaican Jewish Negro or Mulatto for more than this generation, nor does anyone claim to be Jewish through parents or grandparentage, etc. This is very fascinating to research and I look forward with much interest to your reply.

With warm personal regards, I am

Faithfully,
Dr. Bertram W. Korn

Here Korn appears to be requesting a special or at least highly particularized response from the rabbi in Jamaica. The type of response needing to be solicited relates to the rabbi’s “knowledge” of Jews of color in Jamaica. Although Korn does not specify why it is important that the rabbi publicly assent to his “assumption,” it is clear that Korn is interested in depicting Afro-Caribbean Jewish identities in a recent rather than distant historical background context. In contradistinction to his response to Rabbi Abrami, in this letter Korn admits the possible existence of a “Jewish Negro” or “[Jewish] Mulatto.” Yet his move is a race-based assertion of denied alterity that involves de-historicizing Afro-Jewish existence once such existence is encountered. In other words, Korn could not doubt that he encountered Jews of color in his accumulating data. But when he came across such persons, he endorsed a historiographic orientation toward them that exemplifies our previous example of encountering artifacts while refusing to scrutinize them as evidential. By refusing to investigate the narratives of Jews of color for what they may reveal about American Jewish history in general, Korn made a choice—that is, he performed an act of denying the evidentiary usefulness of certain artifacts without

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submitting those artifacts to critical scrutiny. His move to deny Afro-Jewish historicity exemplified, in other words, an ontological fallacy.

In a commentary on Sartre, Gordon offers the following observation about decisions such as those revealed in the letters above. When researchers embrace the evidentiary fallacy,

What echoes from the irritating mouths of “Others” is the peculiar form of evidence that Sartre identifies in Being and Nothingness as “unpersuasive evidence.” If pressed, what emerges is a fault in the source of the evidence. “Nothing good springeth from that well.”

Elsewhere, he elaborates:

Evidence is the symptom of repressed reality. It signifies that which is either suppressed or that which we have attempted to suppress. For others, it is an insistent, near-sociopathic denial of the relevance of reality. Evidence, for those who have taken that turn, simply disappears from their purview. For, as in the case of the single-minded solipsist, the individual whose self literally becomes the world, there is no outside, no “others,” to offer an open door through which to encounter the appearance of things beyond their control. Evidence is, after all, found. Fabrication is, after all, an affront to evidence; it is to present something as evidence that is, in effect, not evidence and, in so doing, point the activities of thought away from reality.

Korn’s decision in “assuming” that no blacks could be historically Jewish in the Caribbean was intentional. Black Jews in the Caribbean, for him, simply disappeared. His orientation toward evidence of Jewish historicity could be understood as justifying

561 Gordon, Fanon and the Crisis of European Man, 23.

562 Gordon, Disciplinary Decadence, 32.
the practice of segregation. The justifying logic is simple: when one encounters a racial presence that contaminates one’s data, then historiographers may make an intuitive appeal to the obscurity, unusualness or exceptionality of that instance.\textsuperscript{563} If one takes such an approach toward one’s artifactual raw materials, then coming across instances of racial contamination won’t require the historian to account for either racial mixture or racial anonymity in terms of method. Adjusting one’s methods to account for human diversity could be avoided, and instead one’s work would be marked by a racial purity that could be appealed to for purposes of historical coherency. In principle, the rationale behind Korn’s response to Rabbi Hooker appears condemning: if a historian encounters a Jew of color, the historian should not assume the person of color to be historically Jewish in relationship to Korn’s community of concern. And in a historical context where the community of concern is marked by its racial distance from blackness, it seems difficult to explain why such a position would be anything other than a racially problematic one.\textsuperscript{564}

For the reasons stated above, attention to how theology functions during encounters between scientists and their subjects should remain a prominent issue. Theological fallacies, we should remember, need not be maintained by people’s subscription to a certain metaphysical dogma. They only require the assertion of a particular standard of legitimation for the appearance of others. As Gordon indicates in the quote above, the evidentiary fallacy is rooted in a solipsistic mindset, where “there is

\textsuperscript{563} Gordon, \textit{Bad Faith and Antibleak Racism}, 70; Gordon, \textit{Disciplinary Decadence}, 29.

\textsuperscript{564} Gordon, \textit{Her Majesty’s Other Children}, 4-5.
no outside, no ‘others,’” through which to propose an alternative understanding of phenomena. Think about Korn’s different responses to Rabbi Abrami and Rabbi Hooker. For Abrami, Korn maintained that Jewish identity could possibly have been theologically perpetuated by Jewish fathers, while in the letter to Hooker, he insists that peoples of color must have established their Jewishness in the present generation, regardless of who may have initiated their theological or genealogical perspective. Because the racial situation in the Jamaican synagogue demanded a more acute rebuttal, Korn needed to be more precise in order to maintain the racial boundaries of his scholarship. Although Korn does not use the word “theology” here, it is clear he is using the history of institutionalized segregation in order to limit the extent of his research to communities of primarily and publicly European descent. Racial signification, therefore, became in Korn’s work a pretext for the “authentic” theological conversion of blacks.$^{565}$

Perhaps to Korn’s surprise, however, Rabbi Hooker was not in favor of this kind of research. He did not accept Korn’s dismissal of a racially integrated Jamaican Judaism with total silence, and he boldly responded with the following letter.

[30 May 1969]
Dear Dr. Korn,

I am writing a [brief?] note in reply to your letter dated May 19.

It is correct to state that no one has been a Jamaican Jewish Negro for more than this generation, although a number of negro non-Jews often tell me that they are of Jewish extraction! It is a little more difficult to be agnostic about MULATTOS [all caps in original], since there are so many degrees of mixed blood here, but

I would say that it is probably true of them too. A researcher may be able to discover a few exceptions.

Kindest regards,
Rabbi Hooker

This note, while carrying the directness of Hooker’s original response, seems to carry as much rhetorical power as Korn’s initial response. The first statement reveals that Rabbi Hooker is aware of the politics of inclusion and exclusion in Jamaica’s Jewish community. Like Rabbi Abrami’s testimony about Curaçaoan Jewry, Hooker insists that numerous phenotypically black people have informed him that they are of Jewish descent. The use of the exclamation point in reference to the black non-members of the synagogue, combined with the hand-written, all-caps word “MULATTOS” suggests that Rabbi Hooker believes at least some (“a number”) of the non-white Jamaican Jews exist in an affirmed alteritous relation to white Jamaican Jews (and perhaps vice-versa). Yet Korn seemed to be implying that Rabbi Hooker should publicly endorse the customary public stances on race that Korn himself may have preferred, rather than the more complex, and in light of the Mulatto presence, historically accurate situation. Hooker’s tone also suggests he did not appreciate Korn’s ability to arbitrarily select and choose the aspects of Jewish history that would make it appear to be a predominantly white one.

While expressing reservations about Korn’s request to publicly state that no blacks have been members of the synagogue for more than one generation, Rabbi Hooker nonetheless

agrees to do so. By this concession Rabbi Hooker was also suggesting that Jamaican synagogue life as such had not served as the only site of mediating the historical relationships between white Jamaican Jews and Jamaican Jews of color. Rabbi Hooker does not elaborate on the content of this relationship, but based on this letter, one can surmise that Hooker secretly objected to Korn’s racially exclusive research methods. But the rabbi’s decision to back up that method’s depiction of American Jewry’s racial history, however, was much appreciated by Korn. In response to the rabbi’s sentiments, Korn penned the following words:

Dear Rabbi Hooker:
   Many thanks for your very prompt reply to my inquiry. 
   Obviously there is no evidence of any Jamaican Negro who has been reared in Judaism [emphasis mine]… With every good wish, and again my thanks for your help, I am
   Faithfully,
   Dr. Bertram W. Korn

Other letters concerning this issue changed hands from leaders in the Caribbean synagogues during the year of 1969. A Woodson[?] de Castro wrote to Korn from Panama, insisting that “although there are mulattos of Jewish descent in Panama none are members of Jewish congregations.”

Although responses such as this may or may not be used to expand knowledge about the histories of Jews of color in the Americas, one is


568 Ibid.
struck by the consistency with which scholars use similar narratives to justify an ontologizing orientation toward such historical artifactual evidence. One is also stricken by the extent to which patriarchy is used to justify the same. In the case of investigating African American Jewry, an understanding of rabbinic traditions of patriarchy seems almost indispensable. Time and again, when those contacted by Korn were approached with the possibility of African American connections to Jewish history, it was considered appropriate to establish the relevance of African American Jewish people’s very historicity on the basis of their relationship with religious institutions of European-derived histories (both Jewish and Christian)—the same ones that implicitly or explicitly endorsed racial slavery and/or segregation for centuries. The point here is not to condemn American religious institutions. It is simply to point out the methodological constraints placed on the human scientist who must work within a social world premised on the occurrence of these historical facts. “Jewish artifacts,” when understood as situated by centuries of European colonialism, could easily be seen as artifacts that rest in close proximity to “Jewish” institutions. But if those institutions were racially exclusive or catered primarily to Jews of European descent, then it makes little methodological sense to conduct research on Jews of primarily African or Asian descent by mimicking the methods that are fruitful for researching European-derived Jewry. This logic holds even if, like myself, one assumes the legitimacy of a Eurocentric point of departure for a construction of Jewish history. If Jewish institutions have historically succumbed to an ontological fallacy of racial signification, such that “Jewish” is almost by definition understood as primarily of “European” or “white” derivation, then it would be necessary to explain and justify how non-European Jewry publicly exists. Positive assertions of
Jewishness entail subaltern assertions of the same. Hence from a methodologically macro-institutional standpoint a scholar of Jewish history and/or scientist of Judaism should search for the ways in which even non-Jews exist through Jewish people’s endorsement of Jewishness and/or Judaism.

The impact of Korn’s research on the historical evolution of Jews in the Caribbean is difficult to ascertain. It is possible, however, that once the Caribbean rabbis learned of Dr. Korn’s research tactics, they became more careful in how they negotiated the relationship between historically European Jewish institutions and the various other communities of non-white American Jewry to be found on their islands. The response below is that of the rabbi from the synagogue in St. Thomas. His approach demonstrates what can happen when one takes an approach towards historical evidence that isn’t characterized by an aversion to transforming artifacts into evidence, but instead by a macro-institutional assumption of Jewish people’s racial anonymity.

St. Thomas Synagogue
Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas
July 7, 1969

Dear Bert:

In talking with Sasso, we both agreed on this response to your inquiry.

There are no negro members of the congregation. Those who bear Sephardic names in the community, other than the white members of the congregation, are descendents of Sephardim. Maduro, Sasso, Lindo, etc. are families who boast of Jewish parentage, a Sephardic grandfather or older lineage. They are not natives who took on their masters’ names. “Outside” marriages are still an accepted relationship in the Caribbean.

I have been engaged in interviewing some of the families for purposes of establishing the authenticity of their claims, and I am convinced they are blood descendents.
Rabbi Blackman believed that Jewish history could be found outside the walls of synagogues, archives, museum, philanthropic organizations and community centers. Likewise, the present study, much like Rabbi Blackman’s investigation of the family histories of St. Thomas’ Jewish community, was inspired by the possibility of learning what Judaism and/or Jewish identities mean for people—even those who were never meant to be publicly acknowledged as Jews. In my research, I was able to locate no response to Rabbi Blackman’s letter from Korn, although they probably continued to correspond. In his letter, Blackman made a distinction between the white Jewish community and the people of color who “boast of Jewish parentage.” Despite the final word being about “blood descendents,” Rabbi Blackman’s efforts represent a beginning. He does not use anonymity as a basis on which to deny alterity. In fact, for him, shared ancestry becomes a basis on which to affirm alterity, irrespective of phenotypic racial assignment. What made his efforts yield different results from the other rabbis was an act of world-constitution—that is, his attempt to reach out and communicate with people of color. Instead of assuming how vestigial or illegitimate black peoples’ Jewish identities were, he simply decided to leave the comfort of the synagogue archives and go ask. This is not to say Rabbi Blackman came to the conclusion that everyone he met was Jewish.

He did not. But his understanding of St. Thomas’ Jewish history became much more fruitful as a result of the path he took.

Blackman’s approach involved an interesting form of world-constitution. It involved constructing a social world, but it meant engaging a social world that had already been constructed, although not consulted. It thereby provided a means of overcoming the limitations imposed on human learning endorsed by Korn’s micro-institutional commitments. Of all the book-length studies the author examined in preparation for writing this work, he came across only one ethnographic work that, like Rabbi Blackman’s behavior in this episode, honestly and unambiguously articulated the methodological difficulties of world-constitution when one researches Jews of color. Hebrew University Professor Hagar Salamon’s research as compiled in her book, *The Hyena People: Ethiopian Jews in Christian Ethiopia*, is the work to which I am referring. Ironically, the study involved virtually no research on African American Jewry at all, and this may imply that the methodological issues raised by her study could apply to many more groups than specifically eastern African Jewry. But in her study’s concluding chapter, she did point out the potential of what may happen when researchers use their conceptual apparatuses to expand human knowledge beyond the confines of micro-institutional prejudice.

This work is the chronicle of an attempt to capture a consciousness of a reality that is foreign to the most fundamental categories of modern Western thought. One of the most basic of these is the theorem of the constancy of real objects. As an unspoken assumption, the theorem asserts that objects and people do not spontaneously transform themselves from what they are into something else…
I was coming from a context that set up a dichotomous separation between Jews and non-Jews. It assumed there could be a clear-cut answer to the question, “Are the Falasha real Jews?” whereas I was asking, “What did it mean to be a Jew in Ethiopia?” After months of a failing search for a principle which would accommodate the apparent contradictions and inconsistencies of what I was hearing, I had to rethink the traditional formulation of the question itself. Another answer was staring at me out the chaos of the materials themselves. The emerging Ethiopian reality was simply this: reality is constantly transforming, renewing, and contradicting itself—and challenging us.\(^{570}\)

It is this latter insight that is ultimately ignored in socially problematic approaches to human scientific research.\(^{571}\) If our postcolonial phenomenological critique of the Black Jewish studies project has been accurate, then at least two things could be extracted from examining the previous quote: (1)—what Salamon calls the “theorem of the constancy of real objects” is a macro-institutional reference to the ontological fallacy of objectifying humanity, and therefore (2)—her concluding observation about reality and transformation transcends “Ethiopian reality.” It is important to remember that Salamon came to her conclusions not only through conducting archival research or engaging in thought exercises that were removed from the community. As an ethnographer, she wrote that “people sitting across from me, speaking Hebrew in an Israeli apartment” disproportionately informed her approach.\(^{572}\) In short, it is imperative that when conducting research on people, scholars follow Rabbi Blackman’s and Professor

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\(^{571}\) Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence*, 46-47.

\(^{572}\) Salamon, *The Hyena People*, 117.
Salamon’s examples and engage them through acts of world-constitution. Research that aims to overcome the social problems of American Jewish studies must contend with what human subjects actually say (and do not say) about themselves. But to date, most historical approaches to the study of American Jewry have not been informed by what African American Jews, Hebrews, Israelites and their kinfolk actually say about themselves. The studies listed in the first chapter’s literature review by-and-large endorsed the micro-institutional relations symbolized by Korn’s exchange with the Caribbean rabbis. This is somewhat ironic for scholarly work in the academic field of Jewish studies, because after two centuries of scientifically studying Jews and Judaism, there is probably only one conclusion the vast majority of Wissenschaft-indebted researchers agree upon—that from the standpoint of academic scholarship, there is more than one way of being/becoming Jewish. This conclusion is exemplified, not hampered, by the fact that throughout the Americas, there are racially diverse peoples who understand themselves as Jews, Hebrews or Israelites. And yet the vast majority of Her Majesty’s Other Jewish children remain almost entirely excluded from the scholarship that openly professes to embrace multiple forms of Jewish history, identity and religion.\(^{573}\) Despite the relevance these observations have for expanding the study of Diaspora Judaisms, ontological fallacies about non-Europeans continue to plague historians’ attempts to address this problem in the field.\(^{574}\) When viewed collectively, the issue of making contemporary Jewish historiography relevant for a postcolonial era

\(^{573}\) Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America*, 188.


The latter point can be demonstrated by examining various anecdotal texts in the history of African American Judaism. For example, it is often assumed that liberal Jewish movements were the first American Jewish communities to ordain women. Yet if one includes African American Hebrew communities as a part of the American Jewish community, this assumption must be reconsidered. It has been well documented that during slavery black women held prominent roles in black families and religious communities. As those who often maintained the spiritual traditions, medical knowledges and food-cultures of enslaved African peoples, female religious leaders became crucial components in sustaining and invigorating the religious lives of many blacks in the U.S. In religious matters, this often translated into positions of leadership, for it was not unusual for black women to lead men in prayer, fasting, preaching and ritual.\footnote{Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “The Black Church: A Gender Perspective,” in \textit{African American Religious Thought: An Anthology}, eds. Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 187-188, 199-200.} In the context of African American Judaism, persons such as Minnie Cardoza, a prominent leader of an Israelite congregation in Providence, Rhode Island, were common.\footnote{The influence of Ms. Cardoza can be seen at Temple Beth El in Providence, RI today. Upon visiting the congregation, one may notice a large, framed photograph of her hung on the wall of the synagogue. When the author last visited the congregation, her picture}

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families, raise money for orphanages or old-age homes and generally organize all the human resources necessary for a congregation to provide charitable services for the surrounding community.\textsuperscript{578} But again, these responsibilities were not limited to supportive roles for male religious leaders. An example of the gender-neutrality of post-abolition African American Jewry can be seen in the fact that positions of leadership were assigned irrespective of sex or gender. Some of the earliest and most influential leaders of Hebrew and Israelite congregations were women, particularly in many congregations founded by William S. Crowdy, an Israelite preacher and evangelist. Many of the women ordained through him carried the title of “Elder,” the same title reserved for the male leaders of congregations associated with his movement.\textsuperscript{579}

In establishing the gospel, the founder, William S. Crowdy, had to entrust the gospel to many, some of who were worthy, others not…

\textit{Female Elders sat on the pulpit at this time}, and one of them, Elder Mary Certain (late U.S. Grand Exhorter) led the congregation in prayer…

In one session of this Assembly three of our later leaders, Elder Calvin Skinner, William Plummer and Joseph Crowdy, all took an active part in the beginning of the service… while Elder Malinda…

was the only such representation of past leadership to be found in the halls of the congregational building.

\textsuperscript{578} Higginbotham, “The Black Church,” 201-203.

\textsuperscript{579} Manual of the Daughters of Jerusalem and Sisters of Mercy: Commemoration of 50th Anniversary, June 1898-June 1948, 1st ed., 5-6. Many other women of significant rank and responsibility are named in this document. A comprehensive examination of that history has yet to be told, however.
Morris, who became the first female Evangelist, preached the sermon for the session [italics mine].

These references are important. They demonstrate that within a single generation of the abolition of slavery, African Americans were establishing congregations with the explicit purpose of practicing Jewish religious rituals in ways that contradicted both Christianity’s and Rabbinic Judaism’s traditions of gender segregation. The existence of anatomically female “Elders” suggests that early 20th century African American Israelite congregations were being led by women of color. Some among these leaders would have been the following persons: Elder Mary Certain (Philadelphia); Elder Emily Smith of Boston; Elder Lulu Hurdle of Baltimore; Elder Bessie Whidbee of Pittsburgh; Elder Huldah Wells of Jersey City; Elder Nettie Allen of Clover; Elder Martha Monroe of Bellville; Elder Georgie Grimes of Danville and Elder Malinda Morris of Newark. Yet by the second decade of the twentieth century, a number of these traditions of gender neutrality had begun to evaporate, stimulated in no small part by the combined efforts of black and white men to gain religious legitimacy through the oppression of women. For instance, during one Passover season in 1906,

Elders and Deacons were ordained as usual. The Sister Elders however were put off the pulpit at this Passover. Of them all, Evangelist Malinda Morris seemed to take it the hardest; it is said

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that she alone cried. At a later time the Prophet [Crowdy] allowed her to resume her seat on the rostrum.\footnote{Walker, \textit{Life and Works of William Saunders Crowdy}, 60.}

To be “put off the pulpit” was a euphemism for being silenced and not allowed to function as titular heads of congregations. Instead of functioning as “Elders,” a new designation was created: “Sister Elders.” And it appears that the process of engendering Sister Elders helped established some degree of confusion among Israelite women during the early years of Crowdy’s movement.\footnote{This is strongly implied by the language of the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century document, \textit{Manual of the Daughters of Jerusalem and Sisters of Mercy}, 3: “By reading these early records, we find that the first important position was that of secretary; secretaries were mentioned twice as often as any other office; the office of chairman was mentioned, too, and that of Quarter Sister. Father Abraham was called “Abraham”, Mother Sarah was just “Sarah” and there was no mention of an Exhorter or Sister Elder at all.”} This development, it should be noted, appeared to be in blatant contradiction of the integrationist principles upon which some of these congregations were allegedly established.

Now, children, you see a strange and alarming utterance is set forth by the messenger of God. Some may not think that God has called me to this work. By the scripture, it told us that all good things come from God the Father, and the things which I have told you, teaching you salvation and good things from Christ and the Father which art in heaven; it cannot be anything else added…. It seems as though, from the busy work of the gentile (white), he is not satisfied with the manner in which Christ has left on record that both the Jew (black) and gentile (white) should be governed by Christ. Speaking of this in St. John 10:16, he said, ‘and other sheep have I which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and they shall be one fold and one shepherd.’ Paul shows us in Ephesians 2:14, ‘For he is our peace,’’ (not confusion), says Paul, ‘who hath made both one, and broken down the middle wall of partition between us.’ It is the gentile; the
Lord has broken down this partition wall between the Jews and gentiles in order to make both one [underline in original] in him, in peace and unity, and this partition wall between the Jews and gentiles in happiness together, that must be of the good seed that was sown in St. Matthew 13:38.

Then the evil sowers are those that invented separation between one blood; for the scriptures said that the Lord out of one blood created all men to dwell upon the face of the earth; but the evil sower says, ‘No, we shall not be together, but we shall have jim-crow cars, jim-crow boat lines, jim-crow railways, jim-crow boarding houses, jim-crow churches, jim-crow barber shops, and jim-crow laws for the Jews to live under.\textsuperscript{584}

These are the words of William S. Crowdy. In this sermon, Crowdy provides his readers and listeners with a provocative introduction to the historical contexts that stimulate his religious ideas and inspire his efforts toward spiritual renewal. Although his text has many layers, he is clearly addressing the impact of racism on “Jews” living in the post-Reconstruction era. Although it appears that in order to understand the passage at all, one must redefine normative American understandings of identities such as “Jews,” “gentiles,” “Christ,” “white,” “black” and perhaps even “jim-crow,” this is not the case at all. Crowdy’s point is that as symbols, the words’ fuller meanings must be allowed to function. Without their fuller meanings being exposed in terms of how they function, one cannot appreciate the sophistication with which his audience has moved through its social world(s). As a result, although in this passage Jews are blacks, gentiles are whites, and non-Christians follow Christ, it is not the case that Jews are only black folk, or that gentiles are only white or that non-Christians cannot help but follow Christ. In other

words, these identities are not ontological equations; they are references to existential choices that may or may not be ontologized. The suspension of ontological understandings of identity seems to be the reason why Crowdy begins his sermon by confessing that his preaching amounts to a “strange and alarming utterance.” He is insisting that racial integration can be a hermeneutical principle for the cultivation of functionally “Jewish” religious traditions. 585 Although a number of authors have sought to emphasize Crowdy’s reliance on Christian mythos for this idea and have thus referred to Crowdy’s movement as a categorically “Christian” one, placing Crowdy’s theological standpoint in an ontologically Christian tradition carries the risk of not only misinterpreting his message, but profoundly minimizing his own philosophical contributions to Judaism as well as the variety of Jewish influences that clearly informed his thinking. Although he is virtually silent on classical Christian theological beliefs, Crowdy is quite explicit here that his hermeneutic should be understood through the contextual lens of Jim Crow segregation’s impact on “Jews.”

In addition, the importance of what African American Jews have said about themselves goes far beyond discursive self-identification. For instance, consider the historical impact of segregation on familial intimacy as plainly indicated in the quote above. Crowdy emphasizes the general role that “blood” plays in the establishment and maintenance of human relationships. He describes the advocates of segregationism as “evil sowers” who “invented separation between one blood.” Again, this point deserves emphasis. Because Crowdy’s understandings of Judaism and Christianity were not

585 Brown, *Prophet William Saunders Crowdy*, 177. In this sermon, Crowdy explicitly refers to black people as “Jewish” people and vice versa.
conditioned by the theological commitments necessary in Euro-American religious contexts, he could freely re-interpret both of them in such a way as to make them relevant for the Jewish communities most responsive to his message. The result of this interpretive freedom was the evocation of a rhetorically powerful hermeneutic of Hebrew and Jewish tradition, an “open” hermeneutic that focused on the traumatic consequences for Jewish families that had been liquidated due to human trafficking, slavery and segregation. Crowdy identifies the specific agenda of segregation itself to be the forced separation of blood kin from each other. “No, we shall not be together,” says the segregationist in his depiction. Although God created blood ties between Jews and gentiles (or blacks and whites), the segregationist emerges as anyone who wishes to deny that blood kinship as a basis on which such people may live “in happiness together.” In this manner, Crowdy was attempting to theorize a type of Hebrew religious practice that could celebrate the existence of creolized Jewish peoples.

When examining historical artifacts produced by African American Israelites, the problem raised for the Jewish and human sciences relate to those sciences’ roles in reproducing the exclusions and marginalities highlighted by the historical context of colonialism itself. After all, if Crowdy was truly concerned about the impact of racial segregation on the constitution of Jewish religious communities, how could he also consent to the institutionalization of gender segregation? It is true that Crowdy himself ordained many women as “Elders” throughout his career of evangelization. However during the very years that Crowdy was formulating his ideas about the religious and theological mandate to resist Jim-Crow racial segregation, he tolerated and helped facilitate the re-introduction of gender segregation into the Jewish revival movement.
originally sparked by his preaching. Of all the social problems incurred by African American Judaism’s responses to the dominant discourses of immigrant European Judaisms, perhaps none was as significant as its displacement of the leadership roles of women in Afro-Jews’ liturgical and domestic life. The historical situation driving this change is rather straightforward. In order to be accepted as equals by the predominantly white Christian and white rabbinic Jewish communities in the United States, African American Jewish men actively resisted the gender neutral liturgical traditions of African American slave religion and instead began to incorporate gender and sex-based segregation into the nascent postbellum forms of African American Judaism.\footnote{This is not to imply that all pre-abolition liturgical forms amongst blacks were gender-inclusive. Only some were. In the 1899 Constitution of the Church of God and Saints of Christ, it is certainly implied that the Elders are mostly male. Yet it is also clear that women were being ordained as ministers to be pastors of congregations, such that by the early years of the 21st century, new rules regarding gender segregation were being implemented in some communities; see Walker, \textit{Life and Works of William Saunders Crowdy}, 57: “The Epistle then goes on to explain women pastors “there is none but one—that is Elder Malinda Morris—the other [female] Elders are over the Daughters of Jerusalem and Sisters of Mercy.”} To be recognizable by whites as legitimate religious leaders, African American Israelite men projected their distinctive forms of Jewish marginality onto the Israelite women in their communities.

In the same manner, historical scholarship can stimulate not only fictitious accounts of American Jewry’s racial homogeneity but also the historical conditions necessary for the recycling of certain ontological discriminations that have traditionally plagued American Jewish religion in general. In the present chapter, I have highlighted a few excerpts from the words of early leaders of African American Judaism. These
excerpts, as well as my interpretation of them, exemplify the particular kind of social problem with which the present dissertation has been largely concerned. They indicate that the social problems of African American Judaism have less to do with the lack in quantity of artifactual information about Jews of color and more to do with the tendency of such information to spur new subaltern categories of human experience, categories that can go ignored in religious scholarships’ renderings of Jewish historical presence. The role of scholarly traditions, therefore, needs to be examined for its potential to present skewed understandings of human phenomena.

Figure 15: Carolee Rosen's First Birthday Party

As stated in the caption, the children in this photograph are attending the first birthday of a Jewish girl named Carolee Rosen. In the past, it has been permissible for

587 “Party for Carolee Rosen’s first birthday, Asheville, N.C., 1931,” Carolee Roen Fox Collection, Special Collections, College of Charleston Library, Charleston, South Carolina. Digitally reproduced by the author from Jewish Roots in Southern Soil: A New
historians of Judaism to assume that the intersecting social worlds represented by this photograph have little to do with Judaism per se. The focus of our attention is the profound social problems indicated by this photograph. Traditional scholarly approaches have the potential to take the social reality of African American people’s lives out of the realm of artifactual “relevance” for understanding Jewish history. In the case of this photograph, for example, in order to determine if any of these black women were Jews, previous historians would simply have asked the predominantly white members of local synagogues if any of these black women were “Jewish.” If the whites said “No,” or if all the women were members of black “churches,” then it would have been assumed that none of them were Jews. (What the women revealed about themselves in those churches would have been considered irrelevant.) However, this photograph demonstrates in a rather provocative way why such an approach is completely inadequate. Even if these women were considered Jewish by their white employers, it would be entirely presumptuous for any reasonable historian to assume these women would find spiritual fulfillment in the religion of their employers. It is highly suspect whether or not what inspired these women, in the sense of stimulating their beliefs in higher powers or historically transcendent forces, could be found in any religion or spiritual tradition condoning the blatant social barriers that made this photograph possible. These women’s self-subscription to an overtly “Jewish” identity, whether strong or weak, is not impervious to the reasoning behind this observation.

Let’s review what we have covered so far.

In the previous chapter, I argued through a Fanonian/Gordonian interpretation of the social problem that actual human conformity to systematic ideologies of race need not exist in order for human beings to create the historical context for the onset of the social problem. Thus it is possible that even an avowedly non-racist appeal to the study of American Judaism could be identified as a site in which the social problem could take root. Using Gordon’s approach to identifying latent dangers in the practice of human scientific research, I then articulated a vocabulary for ascertaining various forms of ontological fallacies that could be performed in conjunction with the social problem of human scientific method. Among these were notions of signification, theology, exoticism, relevance, evidence, strong bad faith, weak bad faith, affirmation, denial, subalternity, anonymity and macro- and micro-institutional relations.

In the present chapter, I engaged in both the first and second of three Fanonian phenomenological reductions. Using a methodological recommendation from Anna Julia Cooper, I proposed that more labor needed to be dispensed in the interpretation of African American Jewish artifactual raw materials. To demonstrate my proposal, I selected three sets of artifactual samples to exemplify the archival, archaeological and genealogical approaches to the study of African American Jewish history. I then showed how each of these approaches could be based on variant forms of ontological Jewishness. In so doing, I executed my first phenomenological reduction by showing how artifactuality and evidentiality are not qualities that exist in an ontologically equivalent relation. Strictly speaking, “Jewish artifacts” could be evidence of “Christian history,” not “Jewish history,” or both or neither, for that matter. In short, it is only a phenomenalist reading of artifactuality that justifies the assumption that traditional
organizations of artifactual knowledge should be ontologically evidential. On the contrary, when suspending the evidentiariness of artifactuality, one recognizes that it is possible for artifacts to constitute evidence of many readings of human history, not simply one. This approach to artifactual interpretation is what one might call a “postcolonial historiographic attitude.”

In an effort to demonstrate the necessity and sufficiency of a postcolonial historiographic attitude in the writing of African American Jewish history, I demonstrated how ontological Jewish artifacts could be appealed to by separating the evidence they yield from their status as “object.” In my second phenomenological reduction, I privileged the role that critical inquiry and thinking could play in excavating new artifactual meanings by examining two sets of artifacts. The first set of artifacts was a small selection of letters exchanged between historian Bertram Korn and various rabbis in the Caribbean. Examining them revealed the possibility that new meanings of Jewish humanity’s historicity could be found, even in extant artifacts already preserved by the archive. One test case for the plausibility of such new artifactual meanings, however, came by way of the second set of artifacts—accounts of the incorporation of gender segregation into institutionalized African American Judaism on the one hand, and an early account of that Judaism’s espoused religious philosophy on the other. Through these examinations, I not only showed how the fallacies undergirding historical research practices could be excavated and held up to public scrutiny. By paying attention to the artifacts left by African American Israelites and/or Jewish people of color and their kinfolk, I was able to extract very sensible and significant information about the history of gender in American Judaism. Despite the concerns of well-intentioned historians, an
appeal to non-ontological readings of artifacts did not produce an insurmountable problem of untranslatable concepts, discursive meaninglessness and therefore lack of world-constitution. What was needed, however, was an insistence that the reader and/or researcher actually hear and believe the words of the human beings who produced the artifacts. This point cannot be stressed enough for its phenomenological significance.

Attention to what African American Jews actually said about themselves remained, from the beginning to the end of our exercise, the most basic and fundamentally crucial practice in order for an alternative understanding of their history to emerge. As a result, I was able to alter the dominant understanding of this aspect of human history by providing the reader with numerous cases that artifactually suggested the presence of non-ontological Jewish humanity. In the next chapter I will build off of these two reductions by engaging in a third. In order to provide the reader with a subaltern narrative of American Jewish history, I will focus on the antebellum (or pre-Emancipation) movement in both the artifactual reality and historical memory of African American Jewry. The aim is threefold. First, it will deepen Fanon’s analysis of colonial racism as applied to secondary historical research. Second, it will provide readers with a possible alternative rendering of American Jewish history in general. And third, it will accomplish both of these aims without suggesting that the proper response to ontological Jewishness is a summary rejection of the possibility of humane and meaningful “Jewish” understandings altogether.
CHAPTER 4:

ONTOLOGICAL JEWISH HISTORY AND THE SOCIAL PROBLEMS
OF CHRONICLING AMERICAN JEWISH SLAVERY

In the last chapter, I mentioned the distinction between artifactual objects and historical evidence. One important aspect of artifacts is their dynamic potential to sustain historical narratives that are not ontological per se. There is a way to approach the accumulation of artifacts via negativa, such that their ontological status indicates narratives upon which the evidence, as a kind of thought, rests. The emergence of this new and different kind of thought is “subaltern evidence.”

Subaltern evidence can be used to understand why ontological histories are not only incomplete, but also wrong. It helps one see when historical narratives may be contradictory or literally “fixed.” In the first chapter, the painting of Ashur Moses ben Nathan stimulated subaltern evidence for the presence of many historical events concealed through the painting, events such as the birth of ben Nathan’s sons by a certain unknown female. It is important to emphasize, however, that not all kinds of concealed realities stimulate subaltern evidence. Rather, subaltern evidence is indicated by invisibilities that demand suspensions of logic in order to maintain presumptions of inferiority. I am highlighting the importance of subaltern

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588 This construction of “subaltern evidence” is built on combining Gordon’s subaltern with his understanding of evidence. See Gordon, Disciplinary Decadence, 29; Gordon, Her Majesty’s Other Children, 26-28.

589 Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism, 69-70, esp. his discussion of the evidence of Kant’s silence over the presence of blacks who historically contradicted his ideas about blacks.
evidence, because it is useful for rethinking pasts in ways that may account for the historical emergence of worldviews premised on the presence of colonized or other subaltern and “invisible” populations such as sub-Saharan African Jewry, African American Jewry and their kinfolk.\textsuperscript{590} If successful, these reflections will help historians discern the subaltern evidence necessary in order to contextualize certain meanings embedded in African American Jewish thought. In this chapter, I aim to show what features of pre-abolition life could stimulate critical thought on the part of non-European Jewry and their kin. Thus what follows should be considered as a set of thought experiments through which racially subaltern evidence of Jewish meaning-making could arise and/or be detected in the historical contexts of American Jewish slavery.

In this chapter I intend to challenge the presumptive extraordinariness of Afro-Jewish historical presence by rethinking documentation of African American Jews in the pre-abolition Americas. My thesis for this chapter is simple. I will argue that a great deal of subaltern evidence suggests that by reading the racial formations of pre-abolition Jewish patriarchy, one may understand post-abolition African American Jewish, Hebrew and Israelite movements better than by interpreting them using ontologically Jewish historical narratives. In prior academic treatments of this topic, focus has usually been placed on one or two issues: the extent of Jewish participation in the slave trade in

\textsuperscript{590} I place “invisible” in quotes, because these people are not invisible in the areas in which they live. The people of the Congo have always been aware of Jews living among them, in addition to those in many areas in sub-Saharan Africa. So, “invisible” here means that which is called such by “mainstream Jewish studies,” by which is meant North American and European Jewish studies.

261
general and/or whether or not Jewish slave owners converted the people they owned to Judaism. I am concerned with neither of these questions. Concerns about an alleged Jewish “dominance” of the modern period’s trans-Atlantic human trafficking industry have been sufficiently addressed by historian of American Jewish slavery Eli Faber.591 Here I am instead concerned with revisiting pre-abolition historical possibilities, drawn from both primary and secondary sources, in which Jewish and non-Jewish African Americans may have shared religious, cultural and especially familial, sexual and genealogical knowledge with each other and Jews of European extraction. If these peoples did share sexual, familial and genealogical knowledge, then the content of that knowledge may constitute one (although not the only) “legitimate site” for interpreting the emergence of various pre- and post-abolition traditions of African American Jewry.592

The sections here are loosely organized by colonial government and by theme. This is intentional, for the breadth of scope will indicate the large variety of Jewish colonial contexts into which the African American Jewish Diaspora may have spread. The difference in bias between my approach and that of other writers is that in my reflections I take as valid the artifactual value of the many extant African American traditions of African Hebrew and African Jewish ancestry. Based on professor Ismail Haidara’s research in the library archives at Timbuktu, one may be certain that not all of


592 Gordon, Of Divine Warning, 76.
these traditions are the result of European colonial intervention. They constitute and are constituted by an amalgam of religious and cultural agents responding to particular historical situations. Because of the incorporation of ontological fallacies into previous studies, it has been easy in the past for researchers to ignore or bracket African Americans’ explicit articulations of African Hebrew and Israelite sacred spaces for at least two reasons: (1)- the pervasive assumption that enslaved Africans’ spiritual practices had some type of unchanging ontological “form” to them, and (2)- the notion that free and enslaved African females were both locked into a racial, patriarchal social order that allowed them no ability to wage significant resistance against their oppression. This latter notion of black women’s essential passivity has been particularly crippling to historians’ previous understandings of African American religious development. Although black women in Caribbean and continental American slave societies were certainly vulnerable to psychological, physical and sexual exploitation, their vulnerability did not mean they had no viable and powerful responses to it. (Think here of Jessie Taylor’s story.) With these caveats in mind, I will proceed with this brief counter-reading of pre-abolition Jewish histories in the Americas; if successful, it will provide an adequate preliminary context for future assessments about the possible presence of an enslaved African Hebrew population that existed alongside, yet separate from, free Jews of primarily European but also African and Asian descent.

Subaltern History and Colonial Africana Jewish Existence

Through his reflections on bad faith, Lewis Gordon has raised the possibility of understanding the historical constitution of ordinary Jewish humanities and artifacts from a postcolonial standpoint of race.\(^{595}\) According to this way of approaching historical artifacts, one could privilege standpoints that need not be the author’s of the historical narrative constructed. One could, instead, utilize the clues evident in the sociology of knowledge pertinent to an artifact’s survival in order to privilege the intersubjective dimensions of its many historical contexts.\(^{596}\) Using a theory of coextensivity, such a project proceeds from the recognition that “seemingly different things converge in the shared concept, since they operate within the life world of the human being.”\(^{597}\) This means that “Jewish artifacts,” for example, do not impose themselves as evidence onto the mind of the researcher, but rather that the researcher must laboriously think in order to see their evidentiary value.

To be clear, I am not trying to suggest that an anti-colonial historiography makes it impossible for the historian, in the process of writing “Jewish history,” to produce new prejudices or be free from prejudice altogether—only that historians’ prejudices alone

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\(^{595}\) Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence*, 117-131, esp. p.120. Here Gordon shows how his approach contributed to the development of Paget Henry’s poetico-historicist turn in the effort to construct a “comprehensive phenomenological history of Africana subjectivity.”(130)


need not be their only guide in expanding our understanding of Judaism’s past.\textsuperscript{598} The ordinary features of everyday human life could help them also. I mention this suggestion because ever since the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, when asked where their forms of Judaism and/or identification with Hebrew religious practices came from, various African Americans repeatedly mentioned connections between their distinctive forms of Judaism and slavery, including Jewish participation in slavery.\textsuperscript{599} But when professional historians examined the issue in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, they repeatedly alleged that little or no information could be found to corroborate any existence of an enslaved Afro-Jewish and/or African Hebrew population in the Americas. As a result, many of these studies became premised on ignoring what African American Jews said about themselves.\textsuperscript{600} The larger problem in previous approaches, therefore, was not a casual dismissal of research on American Jews in colonial contexts. It was rather the researchers’ refusal to apply their scholarly cares to historical subjects of a different standpoint than a Eurocentric and, as we have seen, masculinist one. But the point African American Jews

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{598} Henry, \textit{Caliban’s Reason}, 153-156, 164.
\item \textsuperscript{600} Ben-Ur, \textit{Sephardic Jews in America}, 8, 188-190. Many of these studies can be found in the literature review of this study. It is important to note that I categorically support Ben-Ur’s ground-breaking call for the expansion of Jewish historical research beyond the boundaries of \textit{ashkenaziut}. This is a thorny problem in the research. Without being specific, Ben-Ur only states her belief that the various efforts to ignore Jews of color in scholarship have been intentional—not simply due to lack of ability, knowledge, resources, etc. She clearly did not feel the role of the historian to be a partisan figure in social activism of any kind. (See page 8.) But the author himself has personally witnessed public criticism of this claim made by Ben-Ur. I have stated in the past what I will reiterate here. Such criticism is woefully misplaced.
\end{itemize}
raised about slavery is equally as crucial. Although it is true that some historians have studied whether or not Jewish slave owners converted their slaves to Judaism, a historical study specifying whether or not enslaved Africans were Jews at all has never been undertaken. These two are not the same question, yet previous studies have usually portrayed them as identical. The relevant historical question, therefore, is not whether Euro-Jewish slave owners converted the Africans they owned to Judaism, but rather whether or not those Africans (or others) were Jewish to begin with. And this question is not far removed from a different, albeit related one: under what historical conditions and in what ways would enslaved Africans in the New World most likely affirm and/or deny the historicity of Afro-Jewish people in their midst? In other words, what the historian of American Judaism must ask is whether or not the behaviors of Africana people were understood by them to constitute acts of a Hebrew, Israelite or Jewish intent. The role of historical standpoint in understanding African American Jews and African American Judaism stands writ large. 

Revisiting historical narratives in this manner need not result in the construction of new theological histories if the historical reconstruction is premised on the assumption that human reality is fundamentally contingent and open. In the previous chapter, attention to this human contingency and possibility was emphasized through the posing of subaltern evidence. The reader may have noticed the relationship between such evidence and the narrative structure of subjunctive conditionals. Although subaltern

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601 Henry, Caliban's Reason, 155-156; Ben-Ur, Sephardic Jews in America, 192.

602 Gordon, Fanon and the Crisis of European Man, 34-35.
narratives constitute a type of subjunctive conditional statement, they are not identical with all such conditionals. This is because some subjunctives are rooted in epistemic preconditions of formal logic. Yet our phenomenological approach has from the beginning been rooted in a fundamental suspension of ontological commitments, including those governing logic. As Gordon writes,

This may at first seem like a strange metaphysical exercise, but its significance for thought is that all thinking has the paradox of coming in and out of being into reflective activity that presents the world of ideas as if they were eternal instead of conceptual. In the theoretical moment, we move from the everyday world of things and activities and ordinary time into a subjunctive reality governed by such terms as what would, could, and should be the case. It’s a world without being as we ordinarily conceive of it because it is a world not of what is known but of what is understood [italics in original].

As a species of subjunctive reality, subaltern histories constitute investigations of the social world by privileging coextensive, simultaneous conditions of historically possible moments, not conditions of historically necessary ones. Historical counter-narratives posed on the basis of subaltern evidence are therefore not rooted in construct chains of causality, particularly as they relate to dialectical structures of human history. They are rooted in a different standpoint from that of micro-institutional historians, people who

603 Susan Haack, *Philosophy of Logics*, 180, esp. her discussion of Quine’s concern about the relevance structure of subjunctive conditionals.


generally assume their readers will rely on traditional understandings for narrative flow and comprehension. No such requirement is called for or expected in the outlining of subaltern histories, however, because subaltern histories are intended to focus one’s consciousness on narratives of *lived* history that may or may not be sanctioned by the prevailing archive. This means that subaltern evidence is important for narrating histories of oppression without having to elucidate with precision how those events emerged or what definitively caused them. Subaltern histories, therefore, are not narrations based on causal, deterministic necessity. Instead they focus on examining the historical conditions that continue to make an alternative understanding of history possible.

As the reader may detect, the kind of “history” I am espousing here is a phenomenological theory of the historical. It assumes history is a phenomenon that primarily entails a sense of being lived-through and experienced, as opposed to simply being documented. The documentation or established record of human experience, when identified as the actual experiences of living persons embedded in the social world,

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606 Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence*, 124, esp. Gordon’s comments on Paget’s “teleological suspension of disciplinarity”; also see Paget Henry, *Caliban’s Reason*, 156: “This phenomenological history will of course be both existential and transcendental, descriptive rather than scientific, social as well as individual, its claims falsifiable rather than absolutely certain.”


constitutes a project in ontologizing humanity.\textsuperscript{610} Like formal identities or ontic constructions of the self, such documents become a confusion of consciousness’ experience of the life-world with our objectification of that experience. For this reason, anti-colonial histories need to constantly guard against the tendency to reify their new histories, lest they suggest that a postcolonial age somehow represents the only possible age that can emerge in the years and decades following the collapse of colonial structures.\textsuperscript{611} But postcolonial histories are not the only possible histories, even in an avowedly postcolonial age. Thus the raising of subaltern evidence serves an additional purpose of critical importance: It can help guard against confusing postcoloniality with neocoloniality, which is another incarnation of the social problem.

In the following sections we will reassess how colonial American Jewish history appears when understood as a manifestation of subaltern history. Based on the re-interpretations of Jewish artifacts begun in the last chapter, I shall proceed by indicating how both European and non-European populations could all have potentially contributed major elements to the historical appearance of pre-abolition communities of African American Jews.

**African Traditions of Jewish Migration**

The first site of subaltern evidence for African American Hebrew traditions can be gleaned from continental African traditions of Jewish migration. Jews may have

\textsuperscript{610} Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, 28-29.

\textsuperscript{611} Ibid., 31-33. This insight was the source of Fanon’s criticism of both the Negritude writers and Jean-Paul Sartre.
existed in West Africa for hundreds or thousands of years.\textsuperscript{612} However, the process of accessing written records on the presence of West African Jewry has been disrupted in recent centuries by a number of factors. First of all, if many African Jewish communities kept records of their existence through the use of oral historians, then many of them may have been killed at the height of the Muslim-dominated trans-Saharan and Christian-dominated trans-Atlantic slave trades. Second, if the various Jewish communities, although on occasion coming into contact with each other, traced their Jewish ancestries in very different ways, then it might have made a general, composite history of West African Jewry difficult. As a result, Christians and Muslims could have used various means to eliminate from their historical records the presence of Saharan and sub-Saharan African Jewish communities.\textsuperscript{613} Nevertheless, the existence of West African Jewry can be established on the basis of coordinating various accounts that have survived in English, Portuguese and Arabic. In fact, up until the late 15\textsuperscript{th} century, the presence of Jews who traveled throughout the Sahel [define] was an uncontested fact in Arab Jewish responsa literature.\textsuperscript{614} Of

\textsuperscript{612} It should be noted that the difference in the estimated years depends on how one defines “Jews”, “Judeans” or “Hebrew”-oriented peoples. Many 20th century scholars assumed that Judeans, Jews, Hebrews, Israelites, etc. were synonymous terms referring to the same group of people, broadly understood. Shaye Cohen, however, has effectively demonstrated that this is not the case. See Shaye Cohen, \textit{The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties} (Berkeley: University of California, 1999), 2-4.

\textsuperscript{613} The pogroms that took place around Touat are excellent examples of this predicament. To see the relationship between them and the maintenance of West African Jewish traditions, see Edith Bruder, \textit{The Black Jews of Africa: History, Religion, Identity} (Oxford: Oxford University, 2008) 136-137.

\textsuperscript{614} Ibid., 106-107.
particular importance for understanding Afro-Jewish history during this time period are the writings of al-Hassan ibn-Muhammad al-Fasi (also known as “Leo Africanus”), a Muslim historian who lived and traveled throughout Africa around the turn of the 16th century. According to him, in the late 15th century, a wave of anti-Jewish persecution spread throughout North Africa, coinciding with similar events taking place on the Iberian Peninsula. Because of this event’s chronological proximity to other, better-documented events in the Atlantic world and because of its potential to explain why sub-Saharan Jewry is presumed to be non-existent, our reconsideration of the accounts of West African Jewry will begin with it.

There were in times past many rich Iewes [Jews] in this region [Tegorarin, present-day Algeria], who by the meanes of a certaine Mahumetan preacher, were at length expelled, and a great part of them slaine by the seditious people; and that in the very same yeere when the Iewes were expelled out of Spaine and Sicily.\textsuperscript{615}

According to historian John Hunwick, this wave of persecution was sparked largely because of a “condemnatory \textit{fatwa}” that was issued against Jews and other non-Muslims who utilized the trade routes between the north African coastal cities and Timbuktu.\textsuperscript{616}


The author of the *fatwa*, Muhammad b. Abd al-Karim al-Maghili, was a Muslim scholar born in North Africa sometime around 1440. Hunwick believes al-Maghili also played a significant role in convincing the ruler of the Songhay Empire, Askiya al-Hajj Muhammad, to issue an edict banning the presence of Jews from Songhay territory, including the areas surrounding Timbuktu.\(^{617}\) Again, Leo Africanus informs us:

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\text{[Mense Suleiman, the king of Timbuktu] deadly hateth all Iewes, that he will not admit any into his citie: and whatsoeuer Barbarie merchants he vnderstandeth haue any dealings with the Iewes, he presently causeth their goods to be confiscate[d].}^{618}\]

Leo Africanus’ writings record a pre-16th century Jewish presence in Songhay. Up until the anti-Jewish persecutions of Askiya Muhammad, there were apparently many communities of Jews throughout West Africa who lived, traded and publicly professed their adherence to Judaism.\(^{619}\) However, after the rise of Songhay, written historical records about Jews in western Africa might have become much more fragmentary. In all probability, it could have been this gap in the documentation of Jewish life in sub-Saharan Africa that accounts for the common presumption that Jews never or only rarely travelled to that area of the globe. Because Askiya Muhammad’s edict demanded the expulsion of Jews from the empire, historians have usually presumed that no Jews lived

\(^{617}\) Ibid., 63.

\(^{618}\) Al-Hassan Ibn-Mohammed Al-Wezaz Al-Fasi (Leo Africanus), *The History and Description of Africa*, Volume III, 825; also see *The English Experience- volume 133*, 288.

in Songhay or any other part of West Africa from the 16th century onward. But despite
Askiya Muhammad’s edict, it is apparent that Jews continued to live in the areas
occupied by the Songhay Empire. Some present-day writers have attempted to
document the experiences of these Jews on the basis of interviewing the oral historians of
peoples who live in present-day Niger, Nigeria, Mali and other areas of central and
western Africa.

Jews in modern West Africa have not been ethnically monolithic. Western Africa
is an immense geographic land mass and is home to hundreds of indigenous ethnic
groups, all of which are constantly undergoing cultural change. For this reason, the
varied documentation of West African Jewish communities cannot be taken as evidence
of a single Judaic lineage or as the basis for a fixed, linear chronological narrative of their
existence. The scattered records of a Jewish presence might, however, constitute
subaltern evidence of creolized Jewish populations in West Africa—including those
among ethnic groups like the Wolof, Mandinke, Mvumba and Ibos, groups that were
repeatedly subjected to the ethnic cleansing of slave raids.

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620 Hunwick, Jews of a Saharan Oasis, 67.

621 See Boubou Hama, Histoire Du Niger l’Afrique Le Monde (Paris: Ligel, 1965);
Boubou Hama, Histoire Traditionnelle d’un Peuple, Les Zarma-Songhay (Paris: Presence
Africaine, 1965); Boubou Hama, Histoire Des Songhay (Publication de La Republique du

622 Bruder, The Black Jews of Africa, 111; Hugh Thomas, The Slave Trade: The Story of
the Atlantic Slave Trade 1440-1870 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 44-45;
Bruder, The Black Jews of Africa, 115-116. There is something redundant about referring
to a Jewish community as “creolized.” This is because all Jewish communities appear to
be creolized in some sense; communities who deny their origins in various kinds of
ethnic mixture do so in bad faith.
By the early 17th century, the Songhay Empire’s influence had waned, and the vast civilization had broken up into various smaller states—a political situation that may have contributed further to the fragmentation of West African Jewry. Although the empire’s disintegration could have weakened the Jewish persecution inaugurated by Askia Muhammad, the rise of competing states in the wake of Songhay’s collapse could also have subjected remnant Jewish communities to liquidation for slave labor. By this time, Jews that settled in West Africa would have assimilated into the dominant populations among which they lived. If this was the case, then over a century after the anti-Jewish persecutions took place in the Songhay Empire, western Africa would have been home to various groups of Jews, each representing a different strand of Jewish Diasporic ancestry and each living precisely during the centuries when the trans-Atlantic slave trade was quickly rising in commercial importance. For example, a seventeenth century English traveler named John Ogilby, in his book, *Africa, being an accurate description of Aegypt, Barbary, Lybia*, writes about “many” types of Jews being “scattered” across western Africa, on both sides of the Niger River. Despite the caution that one must exercise when consulting Ogilby’s and other European explorers’ travelogues, what make their accounts interesting is their general acknowledgement of multiple, culturally diverse (read: creolized) societies of Jews living in West Africa at the time. Ogilby, for example, is careful to distinguish between the “natives” who live along the Niger, the “Asian strangers” whose ancestors had travelled to Africa in ancient times,


and the European Jews in exile. And it is not the only such observation. Francisco Coelho’s 1669 account of mixed-race Jews living in the Cape Verdean islands illustrates the point even further.

They are assigned the introduction of cocoa (coming from Brazil) in Prince Island and Sao Tome…and…, without real evidence (they practice) some local dietary restrictions…they use the six branches star as a magic sign of Nigeria and some features of cabalistic numerology, some ritual details.625

Coelho’s elaboration might provide some insight into the Atlantic world’s Afro-Jewish creolizations taking place by the mid-17th century. If the Magen David was actually being used as a “magic sign of Nigeria,” then there is evidence that as early as the 1600’s, Cape Verdean Jews of color were associating symbols of Jewish mysticism with the African continent. According to Inquisition records these Jews were, in part, of Angolan descent.626 It is therefore questionable whether or not the “Nigeria” mentioned by Coelho was geographically located in the same area as the “Nigeria” nation-state of today. But it is relevant to note that during this time period, the Portuguese were reportedly involved in the trading of slaves in the Niger river basin. If this is true, then such a fact may explain why according to present-day Nigerian traditions, the descendants of Jews who then lived along the Niger adopted the Star of David as their own symbol.627

625 Ibid., 116.

626 Ibid., 117.

The continued presence of West African Jewry in the early and mid- 18th century may also be documented in the records preserved in the official library of Timbuktu, Mali.\textsuperscript{628} These historical documents demonstrate that by the 18th century, Jewish groups were continuing to travel between North and West Africa, despite the presence of anti-Jewish sentiment in many places along the trade routes between the Algerian coast and the Niger River basin. A Scottish traveler named Mungo Park, writing in the late 18th century in his \textit{Voyage dans l'interieur de l'Afrique}, describes the presence of some of these Jews in the region around Timbuktu. According to him, they were largely Islamic in religious observance.\textsuperscript{629}

As demonstrated by Park’s account, it is possible that as they travelled further into the interior of sub-Saharan Africa, Europeans were gradually beginning to be introduced to the ethnic and religious diversity of African Hebrew populations and their kin. This caused some Europeans to depict their existence as completely mythological and fictive. For example, some Europeans in the early nineteenth century did not believe in the existence of “Yahoodee,” an allegedly independent Jewish state in 18th and 19th century West Africa that may have evolved out of a confederation of Hebrew nations and ethnic groups that existed along the Niger. According to English writer, Joseph Dupuis (1824),

\begin{quote}
Yahoodee, [is] a country or town of non-existence. Yahoodee simply implies Jews, the tribes of Jews, &c. which term the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{628} Haidara, \textit{Le Juifs de Timbouctou}, 21.

Moslems apply to those people of the Mosaic faith who inhabit the lower Atlas, and the district of Suse. They also apply the term Yahoodee to the Hebrew or Jewish tribes, whether native Africans or not, who inhabit Marroa, some parts of Fillany, and the neighborhood of Timbuctoo. Of these people I imagine the author of the information spoke, when he endeavored to make Mr. Bowdich comprehend the import of the word Yahoodee. As a nation or a tribe they cannot be inserted with propriety in any map, for they exist even in a more deplorable state of servitude and humiliation in those districts than in the empire of Morocco.  

In this excerpt Dupuis denies the political existence of Yahoodie but affirms the existence of different ancestral traditions for different Hebrew-oriented populations in West Africa. He emphasizes that there are people “of the Mosaic faith” who are considered to be Jewish, “whether native Africans or not.” Thus, in continuity with our depiction thus far, Dupuis may have recorded the existence of ethnically creolized Jewish communities of multiple ethnic lineages.

Dupuis was arguing for the political non-existence of Yahoodie in response to the publication of a number of colonial maps that had been reproduced, depicting the alleged existence of the Jewish state. Yet other accounts seem to have contradicted Dupuis’ depiction. In Richard and John Landers’ (1838) *Journal of an Expedition to Explore the Course and Termination of the Niger*, they record that “Yaoorie [sic—“Youry” in Dupuis’ account] is a large, flourishing and united kingdom,” and according to Joseph Williams, the Landers’ geographic description placed Yahoodie “on the Niger River… in

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Dupuis’ initial doubts concerning the existence of the Jewish kingdom may have in part stemmed from the fact that Dupuis used Ashanti Muslims as the sources for his information about the Jews of the Niger basin. Although he is quick to dismiss their ability for self-governance, it is also clear that his sources are unambiguous about the continued existence of significant numbers of Jews in the early 19th century West African interior. I quote him at length.

The Jews of Soudan are, according to my informers, divided into many large and small tribes, with whose names they are unacquainted. Their mode of life in some countries is pastoral; but the towns are filled with traders and artificers of that faith, who gain a subsistence at their several employments, in the service of the Moslems, under whose government they live as vassals. This, in reference to Mr. Bowditch’s kingdom of ‘Yahoodee,’ I may be permitted to say, is the only state of society in which that oppressed nation is suffered to live; and the tribes, without security in their possessions, without public avenues or arms, are hourly exposed to insult and rapine from the blind zeal and active bigotry by which their lords are animated in these countries. The lands occupied by these people cover a wide extent, between Massina and Kaby. They are said to be mingled also with the upper Foulaha tribes, eastward of Timbuctoo, and in many parts of Marroa they have inheritances or are employed as artificers in the cities and towns; ‘As we live among the heathens,’ said Bashaw [the leading Moor among the Ashanti during Dupuis stay in West Africa], ‘so do the Jews in Marroa and Fillany with our brethren; but they are not esteemed like us, for they are a people hardened in their sins and obstinate in infidelity; the anger of God is upon them, and therefore are they given to the rule of the Moslems until they shall become incorporated with the faithful.’ The tribes are not black, but of a colour resembling the Arabs of the north. But what is more material, these Soudanic Jews are reported to have

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been the original inhabitants thereabout, before the Arabs were acquainted with central Africa. They are, perhaps, distinguished from the Hebrews, the posterity of Abraham, inasmuch as I never heard them described under the appellation of Bani Israel; although that name must have been familiar to the Moslems from the pages of the Koran; and I found, in antecedent conversations, upon the subject of Egypt, they were well informed of the events which befell the children of Israel in the days of Moses… It will be sufficient to say, that the introduction of the Jews to Soudan is a subject worthy of investigation. If my information be well grounded, and a correspondence could by any means be opened with these insulated tribes, much important information relative to the early ages in Africa, might be derived through their agency, as they would have been the first people, it is presumed, who were gifted with the art of writing. These tribes, whether Hebrew or African, wandered, it is believed, originally from the neighborhood of Upper Egypt, while the children of Israel were held in captivity.632

The Jews described in this passage are diverse. They are split up into “many” communities and their way of life is characterized by a negotiation between their ancestral heritage and the cultural dominance of Islam. In addition, the peoples are relatively widespread. “The lands occupied by these people cover a wide extent,” Dupuis writes, suggesting that the population group to which he is referring cannot be located in a single geographic area. As a result, rumors have spread that over time, ethnic and probably religious mixture has taken place. “They are said to be mingled” (italics mine), he says, with the Fulani and others who live along the Niger River “eastward of Timbuctoo.” In lieu of closely analyzing accounts such as this, most contemporary postcolonial writing has viewed them suspiciously, emphasizing the role of Europeans in propagating orientalist myths of ancestry. Although this is done to restrict scholars from

uncritically asserting notions which amount to an oversimplification and colonization of various non-European people’s historicity, in the case of African Jewry, such an approach may have proven too easy to distort what little information could be gained by privileging the narratives of non-European peoples themselves. For example, although it could be pointed out that the content and value of Landers’ accounts here depends a great deal on one’s standpoint, the information contained therein is not solely a colonial signification of traditional African ethnicities. The authors of these passages make distinctions between the Jews, heathens, Muslims, Foulaha tribes, Marroa tribes, and the geographic region of Yaoorie (or Youry). Although the Europeans’ knowledge of these nations and peoples may have been minimal, it does not follow that their awareness of the distinctions between these various groups was equally erroneous. In addition, Williams focuses on the on-going relationship between trans-generational oppression and the repression of Jewish heritages, such that although it might at first appear that the account is rooted solely in Western biases, he remains careful to draw his distinctions between what he admits are inherently mixed populations. One component of these narratives, therefore, (in addition to Euro-colonial acts of signification) is the admission of the mundanity of religious and ethnic creolization among African Jews located in the African interior. If accurate, this record of ethnic mixture and creolization could have implications for how historians study Africana Judaisms.

In 1860 a rabbi from Morocco named Mardochee Aby Serour (seen below) travelled to Timbuktu and visited some of the creolized West African Jews mentioned
Eventually Moroccan Jews established commerce with them, and as a result of Rabbi Serour’s influence, a synagogue was built. Years later, in 1880, after accepting a position with the Societe do Geographie in France, Mardochee would write about the continued existence of the nomadic populations of West African Jewry. According to him, they were scattered and could be found in various places in the desert.

At this point, what one begins to notice in the various descriptions of West African Jewry is a large diversity of narratives, backgrounds, languages and heritages—all of which claim some historical connection to the Jewish Diaspora. In his early 20th century work, *Travels in North Africa*, Nahum Slouschz noted the difficulties of reconstructing the history of these communities. “It is not all surprising,” he writes,

> to encounter in every part of the desert traces—and even survivals—of a primitive Judaism which at one time played an important role in the whole region of the Sahara from Senegal to the very borders of Somaliland.

The West African branches of the Jewish Diaspora are known by various names, each of which may represent a greater complexity in any attempt to map out a chronological history of it. There are the Moroccan Sephardim, the Gaul of the Senegambia, the mixed-race Jews of the Cape Verdean islands, the Jews of the Soudan,

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634 Ibid.

635 Ibid.

the desert Touareg Jews, the Yehud Chaibar, the Bani Israel, and others not mentioned in
detail here. I have also, for purposes of emphasis, italicized the portions of these
statements that indicate the witnesses were not bearing testimony to a tiny, numerically
negligible population. “Many” tribes, “large” and “small,” “scattered everywhere” and
“in every part of the desert” are the words used to describe the potential cultural reach of
the African Hebrew Diaspora. The reports and evidence available do not bear testimony
nor allow one to theorize a small contingent of Jews who are a tiny remnant of a once
significant population of people. If these traditions are accurate, one must conclude that
collectively, these groups were neither small in number nor diversity. The religious
practices of these communities, while bearing some similarities, may have also bore
tremendous differences between them. The Cape Verdean Jews, owing to their New
Christian past, may have been more influenced by Roman Catholicism, while the Bani
Israel may have been more influenced by Islam and the other surrounding traditional
religious cultures.  

As a result of this possible historical, linguistic and religious
diversity, it may not only have become very difficult for European writers to chronicle
the activities of West African Jewry, they and their readers may have had difficulty
distinguishing particular African ethnic groups from one another. This ignorance
about African cultural diversity could possibly have helped sustain even more confusing
myths about the conceptual uniformity of “Negroes” and the African / Negro race
potentially being the “lost tribes” of Israel. At times, Africans and African Americans

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during the colonial era noted the existence of various West African Jewish Diasporas, but in trying to accurately convey the ethnic complexity of this Diaspora, their knowledge of it may have either become subsumed in the burgeoning Protestant literature on lost tribes mythology or dismissed altogether as pure speculation rooted in racially fallacious inferences.  

In time, oral traditions in both African and African American Hebrew communities would record the destruction and liquidation of entire West African Jewish communities for slave labor. And without documenting any one of these various Jewish communities’ elimination, the references here—particularly the multiple reports of West African persecution—take such narratives out of the realm of pure speculation and make their historicity difficult to deny. However, another revealing aspect of these references, particularly as found in the writings of Rabbi Serour, has to do with the relationship between western and central African Jewish Diasporas and other Jewish Diasporas. It appears that many generations could pass, with few or no descendants of Jews practicing Judaism (as interpreted in rabbinic communities), and yet the descendants of African Jews could nonetheless espouse an affirmed alteritous relation to Jewish contemporaries who did practice the religion of Judaism in their daily lives. Therefore the cultural memory of Jewish descent may not have predetermined the daily religious performances of a number of these communities. Religiously speaking, the Jews of Timbuktu could have practiced Islam for generations and all the while remained in an

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640 Rudolph Windsor, From Babylon to Timbuktu (Atlanta: Windsor’s Golden Series, 2003), 120-134.
affirmed alteritous relation to Moroccan Jews, who may or may not have preferred to practice Islam in their daily lives. This diversity of backgrounds in the western African Jewish Diasporas constitutes subaltern evidence of a profound kind. The subaltern narratives that emerge suggest that Jewish communities in western and central Africa may have maintained genealogical consciousness of their connectedness to other Jewish communities without subsuming that genealogical awareness in any ontological form of Judaism, per se. It appears that this evidence is what Rabbi Serour and others were encountering when they described “traces” of African Jewry as “scattered everywhere” and “in every part of the desert.” Although it is true that when taken individually, these references to various groups of African Jews may have revealed few details about the daily life of West African Jewry in the three centuries following the edict of Askiya Muhammad, when taken together they provide circumstantial evidence of surviving, and at times thriving and ethnically diverse Jewish populations living in West Africa during the era of modern trans-Atlantic human trafficking. Furthermore, this ethnic diversity cannot be presumed to have been constituted by multiplicitous instances of ontological Jewishness (i.e.—Ibo Jews, Yoruba Jews, Mvumba Jews, etc.) Rather, the evidence supports the existence of large groups of African Jews who do not correspond to any particular Jewish essence. One could affirm a Jewish or Hebrew or Israelite subject location because Igbo or because Yoruba or because Ashante. Such narratives are not manifestations of black orientalism. They are affirmative acknowledgments of the complex forms of mixture and creolization which arose due to centuries of continuous trade, forced migration, anti-Semitic repression, human trafficking, intermarriage and the other kinds of fragmentations due to modernity’s impact on the African continent and its
peoples. Thus it is not that no historical evidence substantiates the existence of continental African Hebrew Diasporas; the point is that there is no evidence for an ontological form of Afro-Jewish Diasporic presence.

Colonial Jewish Families in the Dutch Colonies of Curacao and Surinam

In the centuries following the expulsion of Jews from Songhai and the Iberian peninsula, expanding colonial economies facilitated greater Euro-Jewish and New Christian participation in the bourgeoning Atlantic mercantile economy—an intercontinental exchange of raw materials and goods produced mostly by enslaved Africans for the economic expansion of European colonial powers. Euro-Jews, particularly those of the Spanish-Portuguese Nation (also known as simply “Portuguese” or “Sephardic” Jews), could use their new international family relationships to grow in influence and, hopefully, provide an economically secure existence for themselves and their families. Using the strong Sephardic presence in Holland as their base of operations and contact, these early colonial period Jews received permission from Dutch authorities to participate in plantation building, commercial enterprises and human slave trafficking in the New World. And by the mid 17th century, two colonies of Jews had clearly established their predominance in the Americas—the Jewish communities of Surinam (or as it was then known, “Dutch Guyana”) and Curaçao.641

These colonies had many things in common. They both had relatively large communities of European Jews during the 18th century. Both were trying to reconcile European cultural life with the presence of significant African populations. Both communities also had some degree of religious autonomy. Despite being under the Dutch Christian colonial authorities, they had no Inquisitions like those in the Spanish colonies. Yet the two communities of Jews differed quite a bit with respect to their economic potential. Curaçao was a larger community with a greater investment in seafaring commerce. Its port was larger and the island was located more strategically along trade routes in the southern Caribbean. Surinam, however, was located farther away from the main Caribbean trade routes, making contact with other colonies more difficult and perhaps less profitable.

Because of Curaçao’s superior “geographical position and economic role,” historian Jonathan Israel writes that “Curacao Jewry always maintained close religious, social, and cultural ties [with other Sephardic congregations].” Whatever one means by the phrases “Sephardic” or “Portuguese Nation,” it has been argued that almost from the beginning of their expansion into the Americas, the community of people signified by these phrases usually outnumbered and became more influential than the Ashkenazic Jews—at least in terms of local politics in the earlier colonies. As a result, Dutch colonies’ Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jewish settlements would maintain relationships that were usually congenial, although occasionally tested by intra-community conflict and

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Besides the Ashkenazic and Sephardic groups, early Jewish colonies also held large populations of enslaved Africans. The latter comprised a great variety of ethnic traditions and worldviews, including people such as the Mvumbe, Ibo, and Wolof.

It is difficult to reconstruct, in the cases of either Surinam or Curaçao, specific information about the religious or cultural practices of slaves owned by European Jews. For this reason, it has been argued that little can be known about Jews of color during the pre-abolition period. But when one closely examines extant material in light of present-day historical and cultural knowledge, such a conclusion does not seem warranted. There are already many accounts of plantation life in Dutch Guyana. Colonial Surinam produced some of the most well documented accounts of slave revolts anywhere in the Americas. Such accounts can lend historians a great deal of information about the extent to which Africans owned by Jews understood the relational, mandated and optional interchanges between the religious worlds of Jews and those of the enslaved Africans at labor on their plantations.

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648 Arbell, *The Jewish Nation of the Caribbean*, 106; for a good pre-abolition example concerning this point, see John Gabriel Stedman’s (1813: 368-369) *The Narrative of a Five Years Expedition Against the Revoluted Negroes of Surinam*. 

287
which Africans comprehended rabbinic halakha might be difficult to determine, some facts alluded to in the secondary literature might raise other possibilities. For example, both the rise of mixed-race Jewish populations and the Christian accusations of Jewish race-mixing, make it apparent that in the Dutch colonies, enslave people who were owned by Jews probably interacted with their owners in varying degrees of intimacy. Although the amount of interracial sex in the Jewish colonies will probably never be known, it is well known among historians that it was fairly common. In the cases of Surinam and Curacao, if one believes the documented numbers to be accurate, then mulattos may not have constituted a major segment of the African population in these colonies. They may have, however, constituted a significant segment of the Jewish communities. Interestingly, the Ashkenazic and Sephardic communities of Curacao and Surinam often competed for resources and seemed to rarely, at least in terms of religious affairs, integrate their efforts. When Mordechai Arbell published his findings on the Curacaean community eight years ago in 2002, he noted that “incidentally, the prohibition against marrying members of the other community [whether Sephardic or Ashkenazic] existed until only a few years ago.” But interestingly, few such restrictions existed for Sephardic or Ashkenazic Jewish masters and mistresses who wanted to maintain sexual relationships with the people they owned. Their children may

649 Schorsch, Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World, 463n236; Friedman, Jews and the American Slave Trade, 71.


651 Historical Essay of the Colony of Surinam, 142.

652 Arbell, The Jewish Nation of the Caribbean, 112.
have simply been marginalized within either the Sephardic Nation or Ashkenazic one.\textsuperscript{653}

In fact, the Jews in Curaçao cultivated at least three documented types of intensely private, domestic relationships with the people they owned: “mammies” or family caretakers, godparents, and “illegitimate children” who would sometimes be employed by their white relatives.\textsuperscript{654}

Because of the self-governance and the relatively lenient permission of Holland’s government toward the Spanish-Portuguese Sephardic community, the practice of slavery in conjunction with widespread interracial sex in the Jewish Dutch colonies made the rise of colonial-era Jewish communities of color inevitable. For example, there is evidence the Jews of Curaçao and Surinam followed the example of Amsterdam’s Jews who decided in 1647 that the Jewish cemetery at Ourderkerk would be segregated for the purpose of burying “Jewish Negroes and mulattos.”\textsuperscript{655} The system of Jewish segregation employed in the Dutch colonies, which also had halakhic precedent in the Sephardic Jewish communities of Europe, divided male Congreganten (not full members of the Jewish congregation) from Yahidim (or full members of the congregation). According to the rabbinic authorities, being a mixed-race or phenotypically black or Native American Jewish man alone was enough to bind that person to the status of Congreganten for life, regardless of their level of ritual devotion or financial contribution to the local congregation. Likewise, Jewish women of color faced discrimination from Jewish men


\textsuperscript{654} Arbell, \textit{The Jewish Nation of the Caribbean}, 151.

\textsuperscript{655} Frankel, “Antecedents and Remnants of Jodensavanne,” 409.
of color, and a number of them were apparently barred from Congreganten status. In some instances, authorities legislated that the only way non-European Congreganten males could become Yahidim again is if their ancestors could be proven to have married pure Europeans for at least three generations after the last European ancestor’s interracial sex produced the child that originally made them racially caste Congreganten.656

As a result, in addition to forbidding blacks from becoming members of the synagogues, on the occasion that they did become members, Jews of color could have faced major difficulties performing synagogue rituals as equals.

Their inferior status [could have been] stressed in the ritual of the synagogue. The mulattos were to be relegated to the bench of the Abelim (mourners). So as not to affront anyone, no mulatto or Black could receive a Mishberah (blessing), and “considering the Respect of the Holy Place” no female Black, mulatto or Indian was allowed in the synagogue… Jewish mulattos belonging to an Ashkenazi master could not be buried in the cemetery. The price of admittance as congregant rose… and saying a blessing for a mulatto congregant was made more difficult in synagogue ritual.657

The rise of black and mulatto Jews might not have been the only manifestations of enslaved Africans coming into intimate contact with the Judaism of their owners. Many presumably non-Jewish slaves may have been required to observe major Jewish holidays—at minimum by refraining from work and at maximum by observing all the negative commandments and other instructions pertinent to an “observant,” slaveholding


657 Cohen, Jews in Another Environment, 161-162.
household’s religious devotion.\textsuperscript{658} Insight into this problem could potentially be found in the historical works on Surinam composed by Robert Cohen. According to him, the by-laws of the Sephardic community’s \textit{hascamoth} of 1787 said that

\begin{quote}
all Jewish mulattos, Blacks, mastices and castices who carry the name of, or are known to be descended of the Portuguese or Spanish Nation [and] all other Negroes and Mulatto Jews… who are truly married or are legitimate children \textit{may perform all Mitzvot during the weekdays and during the afternoon of the Sabbath and Holidays} [italics mine].\textsuperscript{659}
\end{quote}

Although this statute appears to confirm the equality of white and black Jews, it may not necessarily be the case. The statute actually forbade Jews of color from participation in Sabbath morning services and restricted their ability to worship on Jewish holidays. As such, it not only signified one of various instances of second-class treatment Jewish “colourlingen” (or Jews of color) received during the pre-abolition period of New World Dutch colonies. It also revealed the distinctively patriarchal character of the Jewish colonies. This is because the unfair treatment affected the opportunities these legally Jewish men of color had to affect future relationships with the \textit{other} Jews of color who were completely excluded from recognition as Jews at all by the Sephardic and Ashkenazic authorities.\textsuperscript{660} These other Jews of color included women and possibly various other ethnically Jewish and Hebrew persons from Africa. In other words, the


\textsuperscript{659} Cohen, \textit{Jews in Another Environment}, 162-163.

\textsuperscript{660} Ibid., 162-163, 173.
emerging racial castes in the Dutch Jewish colonies did not only indicate white Jewish men’s struggle with racial difference. It indicated their struggle with sexual difference as well. Behind the practice of Jewish racial segregation could have laid concerns that allowing Jewish men of color to be treated as equals with white Jewish men would have threatened the entire sexual order of the Dutch Jewish colonies in question.  This would have been the case for a variety of reasons. Among them one may count the fact that African men simply outnumbered European men in these colonies. Allowing men of color to function equally with white Jewish men may have affected the political and economic benefits enjoyed by the white Jewish men inside the colony. Also, because far more black women lived on these colonies than white women, allowing Jewish men of color to function as equals may have threatened the overall white racial hegemony of the local Jewish community. In addition, it is entirely possible that the black and mulatto Jewish men may have understood human sexuality differently than the white Jewish colonists, and there could have been a fear that these “African” understandings would have the white Jewish colonists’ more rabbinic traditions.

These dynamics, among others, constituted the historical beginnings of some forms of African American Judaism, and in many ways, they could have represented New World Jewry’s struggle to keep Judaism united, despite the slave-labor cultures of the colonies. According to Jonathan Schorsch, Black and mulatto Jewish individuals were often welcomed in early modern Euro-Jewish communities more so than groups of

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661 Ibid., 173.
Afro-Jews. Trans-Atlantic Jews, in other words, may have dealt with modernity’s “new” Jewish races by emphasizing the existence of individual, interpersonal differences in Jewish ethnicity while not permitting, welcoming or even acknowledging the creation of new forms of Jewishness and/or Judaism. In short, the grammatical logic of preserving colonial Jewish presence was the denial of non-ontological Jewish communities. Consider, again, the sheer breadth of the Dutch colonial Jewish communities’ creolization implied by the quote above. “Jewish mulattos, Blacks, mastices, castices who carry the name of, or are known to be descended of the Portuguese or Spanish Nation [and] all other Negroes and Mulatto Jews…” are all being policed by the Jewish communities’ legislative norms. These norms in turn constituted the religious plausibility structures for the communities of people fitting the description of these creoles. Thus the resistance to creating African American Jewish institutions may therefore be considered subaltern evidence for the political problems that might have arisen for European Jews if they allowed the competing notions of Jewish presence to flourish while they were still largely under the rule of European Christendom. For this reason, Europeanness (or white racial assignment) would eventually become a leitmotif of Jewish emancipation in the Americas, and the Dutch colonies’ Jewish communities would struggle with this unfortunate chapter of their history for many, many years.

And eventually in 1856, a few years before the abolition of slavery came to both

colonies, a gubernatorial edict would be issued to the Jewish community of Curaçao, forcing it to “recognize as members[?] of the Jewish community, the children of slaves converted to Judaism.” Once again, this evidence amounts to a recurrent theme. It does not indicate that African American Jews of diverse creolizations did not exist during the pre-abolition periods of the Dutch colonies. Rather, what did not exist for people of color was an ontological form of Dutch colonial Jewishness.

Afro-Jewish Families in the Colonial French Caribbean

Although some Jews of color in the French Colonies of Haiti and Saint Domingue seemed to function fairly independently, one also finds many references to them struggling with racial and religious assimilation in ways similar to those of the Dutch Jewish colonists. The possible interpretations of these struggles, once noticed, may be difficult to ignore. According to Saul Friedman, author of Jews and the American Slave Trade, one Jesuit priest, Jean-Jacques Farganel “found [Haitian] Jewish prayer services ‘deplorable’ and was especially exercised by the fact that some Jews were not only instructing their slaves in Jewish dogma, but were actually circumcising them as well.” Although it is possible Fergana’s observation was manufactured and motivated more by a desire to malign the European Jewish colonists than report the truth, the accusation of “Judaizing” slaves was repeated, again and again, amongst Haitian Jewry’s political enemies. In a 1764 letter sent from Jean Baptiste Comte d’Estaing, the governor general


665 Friedman, Jews and the American Slave Trade, 73.
of the “French Windward Islands of America,” to the French minister of foreign affairs, the charges of Judaizing were direct. “I want to report to you,” d’Estaing wrote, “that I want to contribute to the public welfare and not to the synagogues… The Jews, owners of slaves who become Jewish like them…[must] perform other useful deeds.” It is on perhaps this basis that historian of the Haitian revolution, C.L.R. James noted that colonial Haitian Jews made explicit efforts to turn enslaved Africans into "Israelites" by converting them to Judaism and instructing them in the religion. If these accounts are accurate, then by the late 18th century, it is possible the cities of Cap-Français and Jeremie may both have held notable populations of Jews of color. These Jewish communities of color would have been the result of interracial marriages between European Jews and African Americans.

In order to understand the potential public emergence of Haitian Jews of color, however, one must understand their rise to prominence in connection with the political circumstances surrounding the French Revolution’s reformulation of concepts of citizenship and civil liberty. If French citizens’ proposals regarding civil liberties disproportionately affected Jews of color, then the non-white Jews in Haiti would have inherited a novel context through which Jews of color could effect change. The presence


of black Jews, in short, would have flatly contradicted the then-accepted European beliefs concerning the relationship between race and religion in contests for civic equality. For example, after Count d’Estaing became the governor of the French colony of Martinique, he attempted to settle a dispute with the Jews therein by complaining about a planter named Michel De Pas to the Duke of Choisel, a high French government official. Lee Friedman relays this episode in his early study of Jews in the New World. According to Friedman, Count d’Estaing complained that

Michel De Pas, [is] “a bad lot,” 50,000 L to be paid in one and two years. Against him, it is added, there are all kinds of complaints. Besides all this, he is a mulatto and a bastard. He has a great estate, with one hundred and twenty slaves, on a big hill, another with thirty slaves… [He] pretends to have been baptized, and claims the Duke d’Orleans as godfather. He has turned Jew in the colony. Altogether there are some thirty or forty Jews named…

Behind Friedman’s rather amusing portrayal might lay an emerging colonial Francophone tradition of African American Jewry. Furthermore, these Jews may have been testing the limits of French citizenship (and by implication, Enlightenment liberalism). The person in question, Michel De Pas, was an African American mulatto and Jew. But in the mid-18th century, French societies were challenging older ideas of religion-based citizenship with newer ideas of citizenship based on “property, loyalty and civic utility.”

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the newer models of citizenship had the potential to include formerly disfranchised
classes of “mulattos”, “quadroons”, “octoroons”, etc., free Afro-French people began to
lobby for equality with French whites. Older, aristocratic French families, on the other
hand, argued that the new, Enlightenment racial ideologies proved that such liberal
notions could not apply to people of color. Resistance to the transference from older
religious discrimination into new forms of race-based discrimination came from the
influence of free people of color such as the “quadroon” Haitian planter, Julien Raimond,
and Jews of color such as Michel De Pas, Raimond’s next-door neighbor. 671 Because of
their ability to challenge many common assumptions regarding the incapacitating
potential of both religious and racial identity, the presence and participation of
specifically non-white Jews provided Enlightenment-era thinkers with powerful
arguments on behalf of full citizenship for persons, regardless of either their religious or
racial assignment. Let’s examine this situation more closely.

In response to the French government’s concern about increased Jewish
settlements in the Caribbean, Haitian public officials replied in 1743 to the French
minister of state Phelipaux’s inquiry about the state of Caribbean Jewish colonists.

In St. Louis, M. de Pas has had several male and female children
from a black woman to whom he is very loving. She was liberated
from slavery years ago, but he has not married her. To the children
he is very tender and has sent them to his parents in Bordeaux to be
educated. 672

671 Ibid., 314, 320.

Through correspondences such as this, it is possible the population of free Jews of color could have reinforced the idea that neither religion nor race provided a legitimate rationale for the curtailment of citizenship in a liberal democracy. By sending his children to “Bordeaux to be educated,” economically successful Jews of color like Michel de Pas may have provided French whites with strong evidence that patriotism, rationality and civilized behavior were available to all people, regardless of either their religious or racial character. And to be sure, the nascent French liberalism may have been expressly and critically evaluated amongst Jewish and non-Jewish people of color.

Throughout the 1780s and 1790s, Julien Raimond (De Pas’ next-door neighbor) became the official spokesperson for Saint-Domingue’s free people of color. In the late 1780s De Pas’ sons married, creating a mixed-race, Jewish plantocracy that, in terms of wealth, competed with that of the upper class, white French colonials. In addition, a number of Haiti’s and Saint Domingue’s free mulatto population, even if not biologically related to the Spanish-Portuguese Nation, nonetheless carried on contraband economic exchanges with the Jews of Bordeaux and Curacao. Julien Raimond, for example,

Sold dye to David Henriques and Captain Jacob Mendes Henriques of Curacao… and later dealt with the Henriques’ firm when it opened a trading counter in Aquin. He paid a bill to “Leve,” a merchant-goldsmith in Jacmel and owed money to one “Paraire,” a merchant in Petit Trou. Raimond also dealt with Salomon d’Aguilar, a Jew living in Curacao who had roots in Port-au-Prince and family in Aquin.


674 Ibid.
These connections did not take place in a political vacuum. The narrative suggests that Jews of color may have played a critical role in the efforts to grant full citizenship to marginalized French populations. In 1783, Julien Raimond wrote the first of four letters to the French ministry, insisting that mulattos such as himself—male, land owning, patriotic and civically useful—should be considered “New White” citizens. His arguments were virtually identical to those made by free colored and Jewish populations in Curacao and Saint Domingue.675 Due in part to his 1784 move to France and his subsequent lobbying efforts at the French ministry, in 1791 the National Assembly began granting civil rights to free men of color in the French colonies.676 Such actions constituted no small contribution to the history and establishment of French civil liberties. The many black descendants of the Jewish families of De Pas, Mendes and Henriques, as well as others who fraternized with free people of color lobbying for French citizenship, may have provided sympathetic whites with ample proof that the prevailing pseudo-scientific race discourses of their time were completely erroneous. These political developments, which in the Dutch colonies constituted subaltern evidence of Jewish persecution, indicate the presence of another subaltern history in the case of the French colonies—the affirmed alteritous relations between blacks, Jews and Jews of color in household contexts. These relationship apparently went far beyond the usual features of casual acquaintance. The experience of French colonial Jewrys demonstrates that Jews of African ancestry were using their multiple heritages to construct new

675 Ibid., 325.
676 Ibid., 326.
political opportunities on the basis of common identities and experiences. They were, in other words, verifying that mixed-race Jews’ existence was not merely anecdotal. It was evidence of the historical constitution of entire social worlds premised on the importance of their shared experiences and common knowledge. Let us examine this dynamic more closely.

**Afro-Jewish Families in the Danish Colonies**

Loving, multi-racial Jewish families such as the De Pas, Mendes and Henriques may not have been a rare phenomenon in the Caribbean during the pre-abolition period. One finds in the Danish colony of St. Thomas that the Jewish community of the period was struggling with how to negotiate the lines of race, family and Jewishness. A 1791 description of a typical workday mentions how whites and blacks who worked in the city would rise at approximately the same time (5 a.m.) to go prepare their shops to open. Many Jews of European extraction owned Africans who worked in these shops, and while some of the blacks who worked in them would work on Saturdays, others undoubtedly did not.⁶⁷⁷ There are also records of Jewish men who financially supported common-law wives and/or mistresses in the black community.⁶⁷⁸

Sometimes Jewish toleration of interracial marriages may have provoked anti-Jewish sentiment. One particularly angry merchant wrote a letter to then President John

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⁶⁷⁸ Ibid., 31.
Quincy Adams about Nathan Levy, the man appointed as U.S. consul to St. Thomas in 1818:

The N Levy is a Jew and lives with a black Woman and frequently Walks the Streets with her arm in arm to the mortification of all the Americans who are under the painful necessity of witnessing the Same for the correctness of this statement, I beg leave to refer your Excellency to the following most Respectable Houses on the Island… and in fact to anyone who knows him.679

This letter is particularly interesting, because the writer insists on the flagrant publicity of his accusations of interracial love in a time of race-based slavery. If Levy was clandestine about his relationship with this black woman, one wonders if the complaints of the author would have been voiced. Nevertheless, public displays of affection for partners of a different race were sufficiently uncontroversial that President Adams did not remove Consul Levy for his public acknowledgement of interracial sexuality in his family life.680

The Danish colonies’ struggles with interracial families such as that exemplified by Levy’s relationship with his partner provides us with subaltern evidence of another historical reality—the emergence of entirely new vectors of social relations in the racially heterogeneous communities of Jewish descent. As in the Dutch and French colonies, Danish colonial relationships such as Levy’s may have existed in both public and private contexts. If so, then these relationships would have given the St. Thomas Jewish

679 Ibid., 33-34.
680 Ibid., 34.
community an interracial flavor, and as a result, the impact of Africans on the welfare of Jews there would have been virtually inescapable. On December 31, 1831, for instance, a catastrophic fire destroyed the synagogue and most of the homes in Queen’s Quarter. (This was the third time the St. Thomas synagogue had been destroyed in thirty years.) However, in the effort to rebuild, the “Ladies of the Congregation” made an agreement to donate the time of their slaves to the rebuilding effort. According to Cohen, these enslaved Africans would “otherwise be selling products in town, assisting with home responsibilities, or rented out to another person.”

Thus, with widespread Jewish and non-Jewish donations toward building materials, a largely Afro-Caribbean workforce reconstructed the Synagogue, which was re-dedicated in 1833. Because of their need to work in architecturally rabbinic spaces, it is possible the African owned by European Jews understood many aspects of rabbinic Judaism. This understanding, at least in St. Thomas, would have been reinforced by three significant occurrences in the history of the colony: the government granting permission for Jews to marry non-Jews, the emancipation of free men of color and the rise of an “illegitimate” mulatto community of Jewish descent. Once again, colonial transformations in notions of civic equality may possibly have disproportionately affected not only the Jewish community, but also the Jews of color in particular. Based on the secondary literature alone, these possibilities emerge with a strong degree of likelihood. According to church records, the average Jewish man in St. Thomas in the 1820’s and 1830’s “fathered two to five births out of

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681 Ibid., 46.

682 Ibid., 52-53.
wedlock each year.” The children from these relationships may have grown up to marry other Blacks, Jews, Jews of color and others, and by the latter half of the 19th century, they created a large, influential black and mulatto population of Jewish ancestry on the island. Because the St. Thomas synagogue, however, used rabbinic definitions of Jewish identity that privileged Jews of purely European and Mediterranean descent as opposed to those of West and Central African descent, “the synagogue’s official entries thus provided an incomplete picture of the Jewish population, leaving the messiness of relationships that did not conform to such criteria to the registers of other churches.”

This situation provides us with another instance of subaltern evidence: the use of micro-institutional religious doctrines to mediate the racial relationships forming within the familial contexts of American Jewish communities struggling to define themselves in a colonial world premised on white racial recognition. Hence the “incomplete picture” provided by synagogue records is a paradoxically accurate portrayal of the non-ontological dimension of colonial Jewish life. The truth is that so many people of color were born to Jewish men out of wedlock that records of ontological forms of Jewishness woefully distort one’s understanding of how Jewish identities may have evolved and been transmitted in the colonial Danish Afro-Caribbean context. And given that on St. Thomas, as in other Latin and Caribbean societies, the people of color vastly outnumbered the people of European phenotype, it is appropriate to suggest that an

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683 Ibid., 53.

684 Ibid., 146-147.
accounting of only or primarily Euro-Jews in such societies gives one a relatively small window through which to understand colonial Jewish history.

**Afro-Jewish Families of the Colonial British Caribbean**

As in the Dutch, French and Danish colonies, Jews in Jamaica and Barbados allowed their slaves to rest on Shabbat and other religious festivals. This tradition gave Jewish-owned enslaved people opportunities to share their culture of working and rest with other slaves who may have been obligated to work on Saturdays and rest on Sundays.\(^{685}\) As a result, European Jews in the English colonies were routinely accused of either helping blacks to run Christian merchants out of business or helping them foment slave rebellions.\(^{686}\) Because of the distinctive slave lifestyles of Africans owned by Jews of European descent, the opportunities for these African Americans to rest on Jewish holidays would have furnished Jamaican blacks with at least a tacit awareness of the cultural and/or religious distinctions between Euro-Jews and Euro-Christians. There are numerous records of African Americans allegedly trying to establish political alliances with Jews as well as demean them for having the same moral standards as other Europeans. Eli Faber records a rather famous exchange between a jailed Afro-Jamaican accused of being an insurrectionist and the Jewish man guarding his cell.

\*You Jews, said he, and our nation (meaning the Coromantins), ought to consider ourselves as one people. You differ from the rest*

\(^{685}\) Faber, *Jews, Slaves and the Slave Trade*, 62

\(^{686}\) Ibid., 62-63.
of the Whites, and they hate you. Surely then it is best for us to join in one common interest, drive them out of the country, and hold possession of it to ourselves.\(^{687}\)

As with other cases in the other colonies, Africans may have comprehended very well the social and political location of European Jewry in the racial polity of New World colonialism. Even in cases where they may not have known the minutiae of rabbinic religious law, they could easily see that Euro-Jews occupied a distinctive place in American societies, and such insights would have been fueled by the numerous instances in which enslaved peoples’ behavior had to conform with Jewish religious practices.

On the island of Jamaica, numerous enslaved Africans were instructed in Judaism.\(^{688}\) However, the precise extent of African people’s practice of Judaism in English Caribbean Jewish households is difficult to assess, in part because there are no surviving “communal ordinances” from the relevant colonies.\(^{689}\) At least in the case of Jamaica, this absence might be explained by the fact that Jamaican Euro-Jews were forbidden to own more than one (male) slave.\(^{690}\) As a result most pre-abolition Jamaican Jews avoided the large-scale plantation slavery that was possible in the French and Dutch Caribbean Jewish colonies. Instead they maintained a long-standing tradition of owning relatively few people. Usually the persons owned and trafficked by Jews were domestic workers, and in many such instances, a female of color who bore mulatto children. There

\(^{687}\) Ibid., 62.


\(^{690}\) Arbell, *The Jewish Nation of the Caribbean*, 252.
are extant records of Jamaican and Barbadian Jewish manumission, and some of them suggest that Jewish former owners considered the manumitted people “members of their family.” In addition, it may not have been uncommon for these manumitted blacks to remain living with their former owners as free servants of color. Although some historians attribute the willingness of slaves to remain with their former owners as evidence that Jewish slave owners were “kind,” an equally valid interpretation of this tendency is that Jewish owners had begun to create extended mixed-race families with the slaves they once owned. As in the case with Jews in Dutch and French colonies, Jews in the English colonies may have developed intimate relationships with the Africans they possessed.

Research on the cemeteries of Jamaica and Barbados each has yielded evidence that Jews of color were interred in both Jewish and non-Jewish burial grounds. The

691 Ibid., 209.

692 Ibid., 252.

693 For a good eyewitness account of English colonial miscegenation, see John Bigelow, Jamaica in 1850: Or, The Effect of Sixteen Years of Freedom on a Slave Colony (New York: George P. Putnam, 1851), 22-23: “One unacquainted with the extent to which the amalgamation of races has gone here, is constantly liable to drop remarks in the presence of white persons, which, in consequence of the mixture of blood that may take place in some branch of their families, are likely to be very offensive… [I visited a Jamaican court while it was] in session. Though the room contained a crowd of people, there did not appear to be twenty white persons among them, the court and bar inclusive. Two colored lawyers were sitting at the barrister’s table, and the jury box was occupied by twelve men, all but three of whom were colored, and all but two who were negroes, were Jews.”

three Jewish cemeteries in Bridgetown are an example. The smallest one was reserved for those people who committed suicide, were excommunicated or were not considered a part of the Spanish Portuguese Nation. For this reason, Mordecai Arbell speculates that persons buried there were also descendants of “mixed marriages.”695 The distinctive engravings on tombstones in Jamaica and Barbados not only indicate that the masons involved in carving the funerary monuments may have been black, but also that some of the persons buried underneath them could have been so also. If persons buried in English colony Jewish cemeteries were people of color, then the burials of these Jewish people of color provided further opportunity for cultural and religious interactions between Afro-Jamaicans and Euro-Jamaican Jews.696

Meanwhile, the nascent Afro-Jewish communities of Jamaica and Barbados could have been growing in size and influence. To a greater or lesser extent, they could have participated in both the kumina rituals of other Afro-Jamaicans and rabbinic Jewish religious traditions. If so, then they may have been conscious of religious traditions that did not hold the observance of Hebrew religious rituals and kumina festivals in contention. If Afro-Jamaicans of Jewish patrilineal descent were aware of their Euro-Jewish ancestry and accepted it as a part of their identity, then despite the Euro-American Jews’ 19th century practice demanding that children with one Jewish father be raised in the faith of the mother, those persons could have cultivated new religious traditions of

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696 Ibid.
their own, traditions that fuse Hebrew or Israelite identities with traditional Afro-Jamaican religious performances.⁶⁹⁷

### Darhe Jesarim: An African American Synagogue

Whether speaking of first generation enslaved African Americans, or Jews of the Dutch, French, Danish or British colonies, the secondary literature alone suggests communities of African American Jews arose alongside their European cousins. Raising this possibility is important, because black congregations of Jews, such as the one allegedly formed around the year 1800 in New York, have typically neither been documented nor acknowledged to exist.⁶⁹⁸ But if the references so far have been accurate, it is clear that communities of self-identifying Jews, Hebrews and Israelites of African ancestry have lived in the Americas for centuries. To exemplify the social and cultural dynamics giving rise to the emerging mixed-race Jewish populations in the Dutch, Danish, French and British colonies, we will examine more closely the fellowship named *Darhe Jesarim* formed in 1759 in the Dutch colony of Surinam. It is primarily the circumstances surrounding the creation and maintenance of this congregation that will be my concern.

At the time, the Jews of color in Curacao and Surinam recognized their second-class status as reflected not only in the rules of the *Mahamad* (the ruling judicial body for the local Jewish community); they also saw their status reflected in the treatment of their

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⁶⁹⁸ Ibid., 17.
African friends and relatives during the ordinary, daily tasks of the slave trafficking colony. This was true whether the slaves owned by Jews were domestic slaves, slaves who worked in a business capacity in a port city or whether they were field hands on one of the large sugar plantations. Regardless of the particular work assignments of slaves owned by Jews, it is probable that nearly all the people of color recognized the role race played in limiting their opportunities to participate with political equity in the Dutch colonial context. If this was the case, then some interesting observations may be made about some other aspects of Dutch colonial Jewish life. So at this point in my analysis the focus is shifting from group narratives to narratives about individual persons’ consciousness of human racialization. This point must be stressed and reiterated, because only by understanding the potential of these Jews of color to be conscious of their relationship to the “white” Jews can one understand the historical consequences of their particular mode of sociality.

First of all, it is possible that pre-abolition Jews of color may not have been morally responsible solely to themselves. If Jews of color were indeed biologically related to the white Jewish colonists, then they may have been morally responsible for their privileged social location in a particularly Jewish race-based plantation economy. This would have made them more than simply mulattos, people of color who may or may not have had a role to play in improving the conditions of plantation life. Having whites in their immediate family could have made them particularly important moral agents from the perspectives of other blacks. In some cases, their genealogy alone may have made them agents of social change. If this were the case, then it would have been very important for Jews of color to fraternize and build relationships with one another,
primarily in order to improve life for themselves and other peoples of color in the slave labor camps. In the Jewish colony of our concern, this might have happened around the year 1759, following the rise of “Jews” who, for reasons of race, bore no recognized status within the white Surinamese Jewish community. Robert Cohen relays to us the reasons behind the creation of this fraternity. According to him,

The Jewish mulattos were the offspring of a colonial master-slave, or master-mulatto relationship. These Jewish masters did indeed take some responsibility for their almost invariably illegitimate children by having them educated as Jews. Some undoubtedly were left to their fate, but others were treated as family members… Some established familial relationships with manumitted slaves.\(^{699}\)

The illegitimacy to which Cohen refers here is, I assume, concerning “marriages,” for colonial whites often frowned upon interracial marriages. This raised an issue for the Mahamad. The rise of halakhically Jewish people of color—converts or persons of matrilineal Jewishness—may have presented the white Jews in the colony with significant moral and political dilemmas. In order to curtail the racial assimilation of the white Jews, the discourses of legitimacy embedded in the Mahamad’s decisions about who is or is not Jewish had to incorporate racial language and concepts. Although the size of the mulatto Jewish community may have been small compared to the larger number of enslaved Africans, these developments meant their power to effect change in the Jewish colony could have been relatively significant. The Jews of color could, by virtue of performing their socially invisible roles in the plantocracy, effect legal changes\(^{699}\) Cohen, *Jews in Another Environment*, 159.
on the plantation colony. Because the legal changes may have been religious in nature, the ability of people of color to adjust the Europeans’ intra-cultural codes of conduct represented an enormous amount of influence when compared to that of the plantations’ field hands. Unlike other circumstances whereby people of color had to request permission, again and again, for the slightest consideration of lenience or a change in rules, male Jews of color had to only perform their dual social roles of “Jews” and “men of color” to merit attention. Such racialized caste-constructing dynamics could have enabled Jewish men of color, therefore, to have a disproportionate stake and influence in both segments of the population—Euro-Jews and the peoples of color.

If this social context existed, then there would have been incentives and opportunities for free and enslaved Africans on Jewish colonies to understand themselves as Jews in a variety of ways. Through coextensive acts of consciousness, for example, they could have been Jews because their owners were Jewish. They could have been Jews because their work responsibilities demanded their close proximity to Jewish liturgical life. They could have been Jews because they believed their owners were their parents or grandparents. Even members of the so-called “Bush Negro” maroon communities could be Jewish, because key aspects of their society could have been

\[700\] Ibid., 159-168.

\[701\] This is not to deny the cultural importance or influence of the fieldhands on Euro-Jewish planters and slave owners. The point is that such influence, from the Europeans’ points of view, was inter-cultural in nature. Regardless of what rules were established to maintain the Euro-supremacy of the local plantocracy, Africans were considered to be, racially and culturally, fundamentally different. Mulatto Jews, however, challenged such categorical assumptions. These Jewish Africans, it appears, who were affecting intra-cultural religious legislation were forcing upon the European Jews a historical change of a different order.
organized around the distinctly Jewish plantation life from which they fled. For Jews such as these, the treatment black and mulatto Jews received at the hands of their white Jewish relatives might have played a critical role in their understanding of their own relationship to Euro-Jews’ religious institutions. If, for example, Sephardic Euro-Jews could not accept the Jewishness of Sephardic mulatto Jews, then it would not only be obvious to Jews of color that, in their case, Sephardic Judaism was more of a racial order than a spiritual one, it would also be clear that they (both the halakhic and non-halakhic Jews of color) were de facto members of a different spiritual worldview and thus free to interpret that spirituality without authoritative moral input from the Jews of European descent. If so, these possibilities suggest that Jews of color would have been powerful moral and spiritual agents in a Jewish colony, not simply passive recipients of life’s vicissitudes.

For the mulatto Jewish communities, then, reminders of this dynamic might have been found throughout the colony—not just in the by-laws of the local synagogue recounted earlier. Take, for example, the following prayer, recited during the maroon wars in 18th century Surinam immediately before Jewish maroon-fighters went into the Surinamese jungle to kill or re-enslave Africans who had fled the Jewish-owned sugar plantations.

Blessed and powerful God, eternally universal ruler, Lord of Hosts… God, the great, mighty, and revered king, creator of all and savior in times of distress will show mercy to us and pity, save, succor, and protect all those who, going to war against our enemies the cruel and rebellious Blacks, are fearful of the foe…

We beseech you, God, bolster their strength, shore up their courage, speed their nimbleness with no laxity or weakness, as it is
written: “Blessed be the Lord, my rock, who trains my hands for war and my fingers for battle. For You did make my assailants sink under me.” Instruct and guide them with sound advice and the spirit of knowledge; be a refuge and a citadel to them, so that they may put down, conquer and destroy under their feet all the enemies, the rebellious cruel Negroes who plot against our welfare, as it is written: “When evildoers assail me to eat up my flesh, my adversaries and foes, they shall stumble and fall. I shall pursue my enemies and destroy them; and shall not turn back until they are consumed. I shall consume them; I shall thrust them through, so that they will not rise, they will fall under my feet…”

Although the intent of this prayer may at first seem clear—that is, providing a sense of comfort to frightened soldiers, it is not at all clear what such a prayer may have meant in the ears of a black or mulatto Jewish person who heard it. Because of the inferior status of Jews of color, behaviors such as this prayer—explicitly endorsing the killing of Blacks who fled enslavement (not only those who occasionally raided the plantations)—were sanctioned by the dominant Jewish community in ways impossible for Jews of color to overrule. It is not at all clear how Jews of color would have responded to liturgical acts such as this one. It is possible that mulatto Jews may have agreed with the white Jews—that enslaved Africans who escaped from the plantation were “cruel and rebellious.” But this is far from certain. The situation is even more complex when one attempts to interrogate the spirituality of Jews of color in relationship to Euro-Jewish colonists. Even in cases where black Jews could have an impact on the religious life of white Jews, their influence had to be mediated by Yahidim (whites). As a result, if self-identifying Jews of color wanted to assess their potential relationship to

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702 Robert Cohen, The Jewish Nation in Surinam: Historical Essays (Amsterdam: S. Emmering, 1982), 78, 81-82.
Jewish religious life, then they may have had to do so through the prism of the Euro-
Jews’ responses to the mulatto Jewish community alone—not as a result of mulatto Jews
lobbying white Jews on behalf of all peoples of color, but rather the white Jews’
unilateral policing of mulatto Jewish behavior as such. This means that a close reading of
African Americans Jews’ spiritual traditions may involve suspending ontological
commitments to how those traditions appear in public view. Simply because Jews of
color may have practiced Judaism outwardly does not mean their spiritual heritage could
be accurately represented by liturgical acts exemplified by the Jewish prayer mentioned
above. And perhaps most significant of all, it is far from certain that Jewish women of
color could express their spiritual traditions in public at all. As a result, various Jews of
color could have had profound incentives to start and maintain their own religious
traditions out of the view of whites.

The perfect stage was set for this scenario in the years following the 1770s, when
Surinam’s Governor Wichers proposed that all black slave women who bore their
owner’s children be emancipated. Such actions, according to the governor, would tap
into the colony’s neglected wellspring of human resources by efficiently and dramatically
expanding its middle class. As a result of this proposal, intra-community discussions
took place about the viability and appropriateness of the colony embracing civic equality
between whites and non-whites. And it was in this context that Darhe Jesharim, the
mulatto Jewish fellowship, made its own case for equality—a case that would have been
known by at least some of the Jewish planters’ slaves.

Robert Cohen indicates the origins of this situation to us in fruitful detail.
The dispute between the Jewish community and the Jewish mulattos concerned the status of the latter within the community framework. It was to determine the function of a brotherhood founded by the Jewish mulattos and, in the process, establish the membership of the Jewish community. It all started innocently enough in April 1790 when Joseph de David Cohen Nassy died. He was not one of the more famous Nassys. He was poor, he was Jewish and he was Black. As a Jew he merited burial at the Jewish cemetery, but when the procession arrived there, the mourners discovered the grave to be “in a swamp and only one foot deep.” When they protested they were told in no uncertain terms: “You cannot give orders here, and if you folks do not shut up we will shut you up.” The Jewish leadership noted that Joseph Nassy had been “the first of their circle” and the mulattos had tried to bury him with ceremonies preserved for a deceased president of the community.703

After this dispute, the Black and mulatto Jews drafted a constitution for their “brotherhood” and submitted them to the local *Mahamad*, the local body responsible for the establishment and enforcement of Jewish law. However, the secretary of the *Mahamad*, David Nassy, rejected their constitution on three bases—financial assistance, White participation, and funeral services. The last concern was apparently a response to the efforts of the mulatto Jews the previous year to alter burial rituals in order to bury their leader “with ceremonies preserved for a deceased president of the community.” Cohen agrees with this assertion, insisting that David Nassy’s rejection of the funeral services “were the gripe of a former master, who had seen his former slave buried with the honors of a leader.”704 Cohen’s remark, however, does not address the actual content of Nassy’s objection to the funeral services:


704 Ibid., 165.
Congregant, Nassy objected, could or should be buried in a procession carrying wax-candles, and the memorial prayers should be recited by the cantor, not by the mourners. They should be said in the fraternity, not at the cemetery.  

Cohen suggests that by these corrections, Nassy hoped *Darhe Jesarim* would not become “a separate religious entity.” But if Nassy’s motivation was only jealousy, as Cohen contends, then an explanation should address why he would be concerned about the brotherhood developing into another “religious” group. Besides the high esteem with which the mulatto Jews held Joseph and besides it being virtually impossible to prove conclusively, there is another reason for the mulatto Jews’ adjustments in ritual. Nassy’s pointed response to *Darhe Jesarim* makes sense if one views it as the Africanization of Sephardic burial practice. And as the leader of mulatto Jews, it would’ve been a sign of respect that the Black and mulatto Jews bury Joseph by acknowledging both aspects of their heritage.

In his objection, Nassy mentions four adjustments of ritual: the burial procession, the lighting of candles, the corporate recitation of memorial prayers and the recital of those prayers at the cemetery. Compare these adjustments to Raboteau’s description of slave burial rituals:

> Frequently slave funerals were held at night, when work stoppage was no problem. According to witnesses, these night funerals were

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705 Ibid.

706 Ibid.
impressive, solemn and eerie ceremonies. The procession from the quarters to the grave site lit by pine-knot torches, the “wild” mournful strains of the hymns, the prayers of the slave preacher, the graves marked with posts and, as in Africa, decorated with the broken belongings of the deceased, all formed a dramatic backdrop for the slave community’s farewell to one of its members.\footnote{Raboteau\textsc{\textquotesingle}s description of a nighttime funeral procession with lit torches and corporate prayer are reminiscent of the adjustments in ritual for which the Mahamad was castigating members of Darhe Jesarim. But such rituals for the burial of a black person would not have been unusual on large plantations.\footnote{Furthermore, evidence that Africans in Surinam were influencing Jewish burial practices comes from the Jewish cemeteries themselves. Headstone engravings on the graves of Surinam\textsc{\textquotesingle}s colonial era Jewish cemeteries at Paramaribo and Jodensavanne (or “Jews’ savanna”) can often be found with African themes and African cultural symbols on them. For instance, the creole cemetery at Jodensavanne contains wooden and stone head-markers into which are carved heart-shaped Sankof\textsuperscript{a}, an Akan symbol. These headstones and other grave markings, which number in the hundreds, demonstrate that 18\textsuperscript{th} century Jews of Surinam were incorporating African cultural practices into their burial rituals as well as their understandings of ancestry.\footnote{But even if cultural integration was not what spurred the change in the black Jews’ burial ritual, given the vastly larger numbers of blacks in comparison to whites on the Jewish plantation, the mere possibility of a synagogue would not have been unusual on large plantations.\footnote{Frankel, “Antecedents and Remnants of Jodensavanne,” 425-426.}}}}

\footnote{Albert Raboteau, \textit{Slave Religion} (New York: Oxford University, 1978), 230.}

\footnote{Ibid., 229-232.}

\footnote{Frankel, “Antecedents and Remnants of Jodensavanne,” 425-426.}
catering to blacks and mulattos alone could explain the virulent response from the Mahamad to the Jews of color.\textsuperscript{710} A synagogue of color located on a predominantly non-white Jewish colony raised the potential for white Jewish religious hegemony to be interrupted.

Further incentive to discourage the creation of a synagogue for blacks might have come when, after being denied initial requests for treatment equal to that of the Yahidim, members of Darhe Jesharim appealed to Christian authorities in the colony, positing in their own defense a passage from the Torah that states:

\begin{quote}
One ordinance shall be both for you of the congregation and also for the stranger that sojourneth with you, an ordinance for ever in your generations: as you are, so shall the stranger be before the LORD. One law and one manner shall be for you, and for the stranger that sojourneth with you.\textsuperscript{711}
\end{quote}

Whether or not the origin of this conflict had anything to do with the Africanization of Sephardic religious practices, it is clear that the debate was fueled by the clear and apparent double standards exhibited towards peoples of color (i.e.—“the stranger”) in Jewish communal contexts. Because of these racially discriminatory practices, the Darhe Jesharim fellowship eventually broke away from the Sephardic and Ashkenazic congregations to formally build their own synagogue. But around the year 1800, the building was suspiciously “demolished,” and the mulatto Jewish community thereafter slowly declined in influence. Despite the mystery surrounding the circumstances of its

\textsuperscript{710} Cohen, \textit{Jews in Another Environment}, 169.

\textsuperscript{711} Ibid., 168.
creation and its relatively small size as a congregation, *Darhe Jesharim* may have signaled the beginnings of publicly institutionalized forms of African-American Judaism. ⁷¹²

There are a few characteristics of this entire episode that stand out for phenomenological purposes. First of all, in order to understand the many dynamics it presents, one must suspend ontological forms of Jewishness from the outset. Even if one understands the protagonists of this episode as ontologically Jewish, it is not at all clear from our perspective how they understood themselves. I have admittedly presented the reader with a fragmented account of the rise of *Darhe Jesharim*. However, my account nonetheless includes a record of the membership of *Darhe Jesharim* appealing to authorities outside the Euro-Jewish authorities for legitimation. Furthermore, this appeal contained language that suggested that the members of *Darhe Jesharim* may not have understood themselves or their kin as ontologically Jewish: “One ordinance there shall both be for you… and also for the stranger…” Who this “stranger” is and how these Jewish men of color understood their relation to “the stranger” has yet to be ascertained. But given that the members of *Darhe Jesharim* appealed to practicing Christians for help in their efforts to achieve equality with white Jewish men, it appears they were willing to challenge at least some colonial Jewish customs in order to succeed in their cause.

Interracial Jewish Families in the Antebellum United States

If the theological interpretation of “strangers” mentioned above was being extended to include peoples of color in synagogue life, then it is possible that by the mid-18th century, African American Jews and their kinfolk were already establishing new hermeneutical traditions for interpreting Jewish scriptures in a manner that would bring their spiritual concerns to the fore. As indicated by the rise and subsequent demise of *Darhe Jesharim*, skin color could not have been an irrelevant aspect of the extent to which Jews of color had access to colonial Jewish life. This was as true in the United States as it was in the Caribbean and Latin America. As far as religious inclusion was concerned, African American Jews, Hebrews and Israelites on the mainland had difficulty being treated as equals in the Jewish community, because most synagogues there did not serve black worshippers. Various congregations such as those of Richmond, Charleston and New Orleans had provisions in their constitutions that barred most or all blacks from becoming members.\(^713\) In the Southern United States, such Jews would have had to contend with official and unofficial rules such as that found in the constitution of Congregation Beth Elohim in Charleston.

The Congregation will not encourage nor interfere with making proselytes under any pretense whatsoever, nor shall any such be admitted under the jurisdiction of this congregation, until he, she or they, produce legal satisfactory credentials from such other Congregations, where a regular Chief, or Rabbi and Hebrew Consistory is established; and provided, he, she, or they, are not people of color.\(^714\)

\(^713\) Marcus, *United States Jewry, Vol.1*, 587.

Given our previous observations about the development of black and mulatto Jewish communities in the islands, it is clear that Charleston’s white Jews were responding to the possibility that some Jews of color could “produce legal satisfactory credentials” from other congregations overseen by rabbinic leadership.

In addition to experiencing the racial barriers constructed for potential converts, other pre-abolition documents suggest that Jewish converts of color may have successfully been participating in synagogue religious life. In 1857, an issue of Leipzig’s Deutsch-Amerikanische records the following event:

_Uberraschend war es mir, in ihrer Synagoge einige Negerinnen zu sehen, die mit wahrer Andacht, aber ohne die Ueberreibungen, wie sie sonst den Schwarzen eigen, beteten. Wie ich vernahm, gehörten sie den Familien, in denen sie jetzt noch leben, früher als Sklavin an; bei Aufhebung der Sklaverei im Staate New=York blieben sie freiwillig bei der ihnen lieb gewordenen Herschaft, deren Glauben sie auch annahmen._

Apparently, the presence of blacks praying in synagogues constituted something unusual for this writer. This episode is interesting because it demonstrates how slavery constituted a relationship that could entail the transmission of religious beliefs between slave owners and their enslaved people. Although no black women are quoted in this passage, if such women existed, then it is probably that they lived in an affirmed alteritous relation towards Jewish whites, not as “strangers” to the European Jews therein, but rather as members of an extended family. Such black women would have embraced

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limited opportunities to express religious devotion and live intimately alongside white Jewish families “in denen sie jetzt noch leben, früher als Sklavinnen.” According to Berger, women of color such as those in this passage may have been freed slaves who had traveled from the Caribbean, with their former Jewish owners, to New York City. This account and the by-laws of the Charleston synagogue both suggest, therefore, that what may have been happening in Caribbean Jewish contexts could have also been taking place in the mainland North American context as well: Jewish participation in slavery and human trafficking was creating the historical conditions for the rise of Jewish communities of color.

Although the racial polity of mainland American synagogues was challenged by the rigid application of its own legal norms, there were some instances in which members of these Jewish communities of color participated in synagogue life. Recorded in conjunction with Kate Pickard’s *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed*, the following is one rather famous account. The writers of this excerpt, Maxwell Whiteman and Nancy L. Grant, are precise in their use of language, and for this reason, the entirety of the episode will be recounted.

[Lucy Marks] was a devout observer of the precepts of Judaism, and, following the traditional custom, she joined the ladies of Mikveh Israel in the separate seating assigned to women by practice and code. In the Philadelphia community there were no constitutional provisions similar to those in the island congregations which discussed equal religious privileges or intimated differences between black and white.

Berger, *Black Jews in America*, 30
In the prominent Marks family, in whose household Lucy lived, she was an accepted member. Upon her death, the Marks family applied for the customary permit for burial in the historic colonial Spruce Street cemetery. This was in accordance with congregational practice, which entitled Lucy to a place in the burying yard, provided that her induction into Judaism met with rabbinic dicta. Horrified that a black woman would lie eternally in consecrated ground among the old Jewish aristocracy, a number of members protested. But the Marks family and their supporters were successful in providing a Jewish burial for Lucy.\textsuperscript{717}

As can be seen in this narrative, it was theoretically possible for Africans to participate in pre-abolition Jewish ritual and liturgical life on the mainland colonies, just as in the Caribbean and Latin America, particularly if their “induction into Judaism met with rabbinic dicta.” In this case a black woman attended and worshipped at Mikveh Israel congregation in Philadelphia, and she herself undoubtedly grew to be trusted as a Jew by the congregation’s standards of halakha. Given accounts such as that in Deutsche-Amerikanische Skizzen and Beth Elohim’s synagogue constitution, she may not have been alone. In addition to Jewish servants, Jewish-owned slaves also played key roles in building Jewish homes, synagogues, plantations, businesses and cemeteries. As elsewhere in the Americas, in addition to the white financiers who have been given credit for their construction, both Jewish and non-Jewish blacks might have been responsible for erecting some of the “New World’s” most historic Jewish sites, such as the synagogues in Charleston, South Carolina or Newport, Rhode Island.\textsuperscript{718} After the sites’ construction, slaves were sometimes given the added responsibility to maintain, clean and

\textsuperscript{717} Kate Pickard, \textit{The Kidnapped and the Ransomed}, w/ intro. Maxwell Whiteman and Nancy Grant (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1995), 23.

\textsuperscript{718} Weisbord and Stein, \textit{Bittersweet Encounters}, 23-24.
keep up these centers of Jewish communal life.\textsuperscript{719} And just as in the Dutch, French, Danish and British colonies overseas, many Africans owned by European Jews on the mainland were also domestic workers in their owners’ houses and businesses, although some of these "slaves" appear as "free" persons in the American census data. This might be an indication of intermarriage, live-in servants or formerly enslaved persons emancipated by Jewish owners. But in each of these cases, however, intimate contact led to people of color living and working intimately alongside Euro-Jews.\textsuperscript{720}

With respect to the census data, some scholars have appealed to quantitative population analysis in order to assess how much of a demographic impact black people’s presence had on the mainland colonies’ Jewish communities. Census data, in particular, might reveal the racial diversity of pre-abolition Jewish families on the mainland colonies. This is because slavery was practiced in the North American Jewish community whenever and wherever European Jews gathered in significant numbers. According to the 1790 census returns for South Carolina, for example, nearly half of all Jewish households were slave owning. However, the 1790 population of Euro-Jews in the United States was exceedingly small—about 1400 nationwide. For example, according to Malcolm Stern, New York state alone held about sixty Jewish households, containing over forty enslaved people. But by 1820, the national Jewish population had grown considerably, and with this growth came a more pronounced racial heterogeneity. At that time, there were nearly eighty Jewish households in New York City alone. In

\textsuperscript{719} Marcus, \textit{United States Jewry, Vol.3}, 15.

total, at least thirty-six black people were living in these households. Such individuals may or may not have been biologically related to the whites therein. Many of them, in all probability, were emancipated Africans who remained in the households as servants. In Philadelphia, a much smaller number of free black persons (about 12) are found distributed among over seventy Jewish households. As might be predicted, however, the farther south one went, the greater the presence of Africans in Jewish households. By 1820, according to census data, over three-fourths of the households in Richmond, Charleston and Savannah owned one or more slaves. Korn notes that in the following decades, due to “growing prosperity,” the number of people owned by Euro-Jewish heads of households steadily increased. By studying the wills of deceased Jews in the South, he estimated that “perhaps one-fourth of Southern Jewish adults were slave-owners.” Korn goes on to say, “this matches the Federal figures for the 1860 census, namely, that three-fourths of the White population of the South were not slave owners.” Nationwide, 40% of Jewish households were slave owning, a figure not including those with free blacks living in them. If this is the case and the census data presents us with some basic facts regarding the distribution of Africans living in Jewish households, then it is possible, therefore, that most Jewish homes in the mid-19th century in the United States were multiracial. Although not conclusive, some of the census findings are helpful in establishing how common the interracial Jewish household may have been. Because

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722 Korn, Jews and Negro Slavery in the Old South, 26.

723 Marcus, United States Jewry, Vol.1, 585.
most Jews at the time lived in cities, we can surmise that many of the enslaved Africans may have lived in attics or basements of their owners rather than the slave quarters of many rural plantations.

Yet census data, for all of their value and worth, are not very reliable determinants for understanding the daily goings on terms of “who” populated a Jewish family. I have described above instances of live-in servants and live-in enslaved people as indicative of an interracial familiarity. Some will question this depiction, particularly given the context of enslavement and/or servanthood. For instance, many enslaved Africans were documented, but many more probably were not. Enslaved people changed hands often, and for a variety of reasons, whites often did not report the number of Africans they owned. Furthermore, the opposite may be true. Simply because census data shows an increase in the number of people a family owned doesn’t necessarily make it the case. Despite these problems, the census records nonetheless indicate, whether by slavery or live-in servanthood, interracial forms of intimacy in pre-abolition Jewish family life.

It is important to remember that we cannot assume an enslaved, domestic worker always worked only for one family. In the past, it has been assumed that if a particular family owned a household servant or slave, then that individual worked only for their owners. However, various elements of ordinary slave life reveal that such a portrait may be inaccurate. Jewish households included intimate spaces between slaves and free people.\footnote{724} Although formally, one master in particular may have owned a servant-girl, he

\footnote{724}Cohen, Through the Sands of Time, 46, 88; Arbell, The Jewish Nation of the Caribbean, 106-107, 150-153, 208-210, 252-253; Korn, Jews and Negro Slavery in the Old South, 97, 98, 100; Weisbord and Stein, Bittersweet Encounters, 23-24; Schorsch, Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World, 80-91.
could occasionally “rent” her out to a neighboring family in the Jewish community.\textsuperscript{725} If there was a special occasion such as a birthday party or a child being born, a Black woman’s cooking or midwifery skills might be called upon—despite the family not being her primary owners. Of course, the other family would provide monetary compensation to the master, and sometimes the master would give a portion of this extra compensation to the slave man or slave woman.\textsuperscript{726} Business partnerships such as this served to tie together Jewish communities and individuals in Jewish families. It could potentially work to the white people’s benefit, whether master, shopkeeper or peddler.\textsuperscript{727} Unfortunately, most of these situations were not ideal at all for the domestically enslaved person involved. Most of the domestically enslaved Africans were skilled, female workers. Yet they were still slaves, and working for an unfamiliar family always ran risks of being abused—verbally, physically or otherwise—in ways their owners could not have known about or cared to know about. If the extra work was not completed with pristine precision, any hopes of the enslaved person receiving compensation would quickly vanish. Nonetheless, it was also to the host family’s advantage to not abuse any

\textsuperscript{725} Korn, \textit{Jews and Negro Slavery in the Old South}, 37.


person they rented. Because of their special sensitivities to the cultural elements of Jewish familial life, enslaved Africans who worked for Jewish owners were familiar with *kashrut* and knew how to observe Jewish holidays in accordance with the expectations of an enslaved person. They probably understood the basic laws of Shabbat, and were able to cook both traditional Ashkenazi and Sephardic dishes. This means that enslaved Africans who worked for Jews were considered by white Jews to be valuable commodities. Unlike other enslaved people, they would not have to be instructed in the cultural particularities of maintaining Jewish households. Accordingly, an enslaved person with a Jewish owner may have been given a little more independence over managing their owners’ affairs than enslaved Africans owned by Christians. Some Jewish-owned slaves, for example, had intricate knowledge of their owners’ economic relationships. Working as clerks in their owners’ stores, responsibility for managing a store may have brought them into contact with white Jewish entrepreneurs’ clientele and partners. Although the census data available may list ten or twenty blacks, with each one living in a different household in a community of thirty Jewish households, it is erroneous to assume none of these people served two or three different households.


simultaneously. These elements of pre-abolition life dramatically describe what may have characterized Jewish communal existence during the colonial period. It is not only that black people owned by Jews were active in their owner’s household life; they were active in Jewish communal life as well.

Upon closer inspection, we find the above assertions supported in a number of ways. The intra-communal Jewish “renting” of slaves happened in both urban and plantations contexts. A George Jacobs of Richmond, for example, was known to have hired a slave to work in his household, although he technically did not own any slaves. In fact, relatively few Jewish people on the mainland owned plantations at all during the pre-abolition period. Yet those Jewish planters and other rural business people were often family relatives or friends of other Jews in urban environments, and these family and/or ethnic ties were not ignored in the creation of community services and financial partnerships. The planters, for instance, could subsidize an urban business, which could in turn supply a plantation with less-expensive commodities, and so on. Elliot Ashekenazi provides details on one such case in his book, The Business of Jews in Louisiana 1840-1875. He writes:

The most distinctive feature of the Lemanns’ plantation management is the integration of their general store with the needs of the plantations. This integration involved sales, of course, but also payment of wages and a system of accounts that permitted the

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731 Weiner, Mistresses and Slaves, 17, 38; Arbell, The Jewish Nation of the Caribbean, 151; Friedman, Jews and the American Slave Trade, 156-157, 170-172, 183-184.

732 Rosen, “Jewish Confederates,” 111.
plantations and the store to be viewed as what they actually were, a single economic unity. 733

Ashkenazi says arrangements such as this softened the financial blow of black people’s emancipation from slavery and enabled Jewish businesses to more easily make the transition from a slave-labor economy to a wage-labor economy. In an effort to stay afloat, many rural and urban businesses established direct links with one another’s fiscal planning.

The next day Gabriel Levy leased one of the parcels of land and the store, just transferred to Goldsmith… and the two slaves as well… These arrangements smack of close ties between the country storekeeper and its supplier… To buy merchandise in New York, the Levys used the Goldsmith name… the end result of the legal proceedings was to keep the Levys in business. The Goldsmith firm no doubt did better than if it had allowed the Levys to liquidate. Other members of the New Orleans Jewish community maintained similar ties with Jewish storekeepers in the Louisiana countryside [italics mine]. 734

These Jewish planters may have had sound economic reasons to either outsource their slave labor or use it for Jewish communal service work. Because the larger Jewish businesses made efforts to share resources, it made sense for a Jewish-owned labor gang to be rented out by city-dwelling Jews in order to complete necessary work assignments and related tasks.

734 Ibid., 111.
The fact that Africans could frequently come into contact with multiple persons and households means a certain degree of intimate cultural exchange may have been inevitable. Female slaves, in particular, might have bore the brunt of this exchange in their relationships with other members of the Jewish family. Southern black and mulatto women who worked for a mistress may at times have been responsible for maintaining the house in the absence of the master.\footnote{Weiner, \textit{Mistresses and Slaves}, 37-38.} The typical duties of an enslaved African involved manual labors of household maintenance such as cooking meals, cleaning floors, ironing clothes, scrubbing walls and washing laundry. As was advertised by Benjamin Davis, a member of a prominent Virginia Jewish family, in \textit{The Columbus Enquirer} in 1838: “Sixty Likely Virginia Negroes [for sale]—House Servants, Field Hands, Blow boys, Cooks, Washers, Ironers, and three first-rate Seamstresses.”\footnote{Korn, \textit{Jews and Negro Slavery in the Old South}, 47.} In addition to these skilled labors, black women and men were responsible for a variety of household duties requiring close physical interaction such as bathing toddlers, giving massages to the master, putting the children to bed or dressing the mistress in the morning. Many intimate details of Jewish family life may therefore have involved the direct participation of African Americans. For example, the so-called “mammy”—a popular, derogatory stereotype of a black female domestic slave—may have been in the same room when a mistress would give birth to her baby. At times, the mammy and the
midwife were the same individual. Generally speaking, antebellum weddings were also places where one would find black people in attendance. The servers, the preparers of food, the cleaning gangs and even the musical entertainment may all have been comprised of African Americans.

In many ways, newly purchased African Americans may have had to lean on Jewish whites in order to learn their roles in the family, including the culturally dominant gender roles in America. Although in many areas of life, the regulating principle of slavery overshadowed and complicated these gender roles, enslaved women still tended to learn Euro-American women’s expectations for appropriate cultural behaviors. However, gaining this knowledge required experiencing moments of trust and identification between the mistress and her woman, and during such times, they acquired an unexpected closeness between them—that is, as much as could be appreciated in the context of slavery.

Because this time was usually at transitional points in slaves’ lives—puberty, pregnancy, childbirth and lactation, miscarriage, menopause… Even Black women could find enough common ground with White women to feel comfortable sharing their fear of the dangers of childbirth, their pleasure in the activities of young

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738 Herbert Covey and Dwight Eisnach, *What the slaves ate: recollections of African American foods and foodways from the slave narratives* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 202-203.

children, and their grief at the illness or death of those children and other family members. \(^740\)

“Illness or death” became important times when slaves were called upon to provide additional, specialized assistance to their owners. It is possible that it was during these times, as opposed to their execution of daily work routines, that slaves had the most profound impacts on their Jewish owners. As a rule, when illness or death struck a family member, people relied on what emotional and in many cases, physical support was available. Diseases such as the flu, measles or small pox, we may remember, were much more deadly factors of life during antebellum, and in this sense, an enslaved person’s importance in providing needed assistance in times of sickness and death cannot be overstated. In her study of slave pharmacology on Southern plantations, historian Sharla Fett tells us how valuable African American healing knowledges became to slave owners and slaves alike. The use of wild licorice, “benne (sesame), yams, okra, and black-eyed peas” was fundamental in establishing the reputations of early African American healing traditions. \(^741\) Older black women, in particular, were reputed to have acquired a large set of healing and nursing skills over the course of their lives. These skills often garnered little public acknowledgment from whites (who often viewed African healing practices as “superstition”), yet they apparently drew a great deal of respect from other slaves, and at times, private acknowledgment from whites. \(^742\)

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\(^740\) Ibid., 116.


\(^742\) Ibid., 141.
In *The Civil War Diary of Clara Solomon*, we find some details about the relationship between domestic slaves and their Jewish owners that exemplifies some of these dynamics. In the diary, a Civil War-time relationship is sustained between Clara, a sixteen-year-old Jewish woman from New Orleans, and the family’s domestically enslaved woman, Lucy Lewis. Throughout her diary, Solomon devotes relatively little attention to either slavery or Lucy. In fact Solomon refers to slavery only to confess her fears that either a slave rebellion may take place or that Lucy might abandon her family, choosing the protection of “Yankee” soldiers instead. But interestingly, Solomon makes repeated connections between Lucy and her daily preparations. Lucy apparently had a routine of waking up members of the household and helping each of them prepare for their day. If these routine details were not carried out, she risked being rebuked by her owners. Consider one of Solomon’s descriptions of one household morning.

9 3/4 A.M… Breakfast is over; the house is cleaned up… It is more noisy and the children are far more unmanageable than when Ma is home. So you see that they have gone. And what a haste and confusion was attendant on it. Lucy, very thoughtless and silly, did not wake ma up, till six o’clock. Then Ma’s hair was to be combed, Ma, Josie and herself and Pa to be dressed, breakfast to be eaten in the short space of ½ hour. They almost gave up the thought, thinking it useless, but by great manoeuvres they succeeded, and I hope are now nearing Amite—They left at five to seven, the train leaves at seven—I suppose they were not “too late”. We are now acting in the capacity of housekeepers, which, with the children so troublesome, I do not at all like…

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This excerpt tells us a little about Solomon’s understanding of what constituted housekeepers’ responsibilities. Although her language is a little ambiguous, it is clear she associates Lucy’s “jobs” with things such as helping the master and mistress wake up, get dressed and eat breakfast. Solomon’s description of Lucy as “thoughtless and silly” also indicates her assumptions about what household responsibilities lay with black women. (Ma, Josie and Pa are not criticized.) Finally, Solomon compares the duty of looking after children with “acting in the capacity of housekeepers.” Such a statement demonstrates the traditionally close relationship between domestic housekeeping and the rearing of white Jewish children in America.

Later in her diary, Solomon provides us with a glimpse of Southern prejudices about the servant roles of domestically enslaved women. In it she confesses how comfortable and appropriate it is, as a Southern woman, to have Lucy working in her home. At the time she penned the following words, Union soldiers had arrived in New Orleans and offered work and refuge for any slave who wished to leave their masters.

Ma is quite troubled about her [Lucy], as so many (her acquaintances some) have run away & sought the protection of the Yankees. They say they do not intend to interfere with slavery, then why do they encourage them to come to them? They allow a master to take his slave, if he be willing to go. But is not that harboring them? They should drive them away. I hear the Custom house & boats are being crowded with daily arrivals. There are many instances in which house-servants, those who have been raised by people, have deserted them, though they have received the kindest treatment at their hands; but they imagine no sacrifice too great with which to purchase freedom. L.[Lucy] is very weak-minded, & is as a tool in the hands of anyone & yet I sometimes think that she would not act so, yet—the most faithful have
should discard them for ever.”

Solomon’s words here reveal a brute honesty about how American Jewish whites have understood the role of servants and enslaved persons in their households. A few items may be pointed out in the selection. First, Solomon lets us know that despite enslaved people’s role in raising children and helping whites perform routine, daily tasks, Southern whites may have understood their role as caretakers of household servants. Because, according to Solomon, “those [domestic slaves] who have been raised by people, have deserted them…” such cases comprised instances in which whites were “betrayed.” There are many ways to read this statement. It is possible that Solomon believed that being allowed to serve whites in the capacity of a domestically enslaved person was helping the women of color who worked in Jewish households. For some whites, the fact that slaves were in many ways dependent on masters apparently led them to think slaves were continually in the slaveholding family’s debt. And this is one way to read Solomon’s opinion concerning her relationship to Lucy. Yet other readings are possible. Elsewhere in her diary, Solomon repeatedly refers to Lucy’s lying and laziness, a sign that Lucy’s role in family life became most prominent only when she did not wholeheartedly obey the wishes of her owners. It is also telling that Solomon describes Lucy as “a tool in the hands of anyone”—an indication of the previous point that white Jewish slave owners could possibly witness their slaves work for other families.

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744 Ibid., 384.
745 Ibid., 144.
on the behalf of their owners. But for our purposes, the most important aspect of these
notes may probably be Solomon’s assumption of the nature of the relationships between
blacks and whites. For her, “betrayal” may not necessarily have implied debt alone. If
Solomon believed Lucy was among “those who have been raised by people,” Lucy’s
“betrayal” could also imply that she understood Lucy’s social role as constitutive for
normal family life. Misanthropic as contemporary opinions may label her attitude, it is
nonetheless reasonable to read Solomon’s expectations for Lucy as a set of behaviors
conditioned by loyalty, closeness and familial intimacy. In fact, it may be the case that
Solomon’s statements about Lucy make little sense outside of Solomon’s presumption
that Lucy’s presence was constitutive of her Jewish upbringing. If so, then Lucy’s
intimate proximity to daily, ordinary household life may have, over time, allowed her to
be considered a part of the family. Needless to say, this type of intimacy was not
necessarily premised on any concern for Lucy’s well being. However, we have seen how
this intimacy could make other types of intimate relationships possible.

Although personal interactions between Jews and the people they owned could
exhibit various layers of dependency, mistrust and at the same time, deep-seated
prejudice, this may not have always been the case. Sometimes, they exhibited and
maintained deeply close relationships—to the point of being more than people who are
merely viewed as family by whites. Some of the surviving Jewish wills from the
nineteenth century prove how important such associations may have been. In a number
of them, former masters make provisions for how the people they owned should be
treated upon their death. These wills also suggest that sometimes a very long-lasting
bond existed between a master and his or her enslaved African. In another Jewish diary
from the pre-abolition period, a Southern slave owner named James Henry Hammond reveals how he desired his slaves be treated upon his death. In this case, the will is nothing less than a testimony to how intimate enslaved Africans could be involved with the whites in whose houses they worked.

My Dear Harry:

In the last will I made I left to you, over and above my other children Sally Johnson the mother of Louisa and all the children of both. Sally says Henderson is my child. It is possible, but I do not believe it. Yet act on hers rather than my opinion. Louisa’s first child may be mine. I think not. Her second I believe is mine. Take care of her and her children who are both of your blood if not of mine and of Henderson. The services of the rest will I think compensate for an indulgence to these. I cannot free these people and send them North. It would be cruelty to them. Nor would I like that any but my own blood should own as Slaves my own blood or Louisa. I leave them to your charge, believing that you will best appreciate and most independently carry out my wishes in regard to them. Do not let Louisa or any of my children or possible children be slaves of Strangers. Slavery in the family [italics in the original] will be their happiest earthly condition.

Ever affectionately,
J.H.H. 746

The concern slave owners may have expressed for their children’s “happiest earthly condition” is notable, as is their desire to sometimes keep all their slaves within a Jewish familial context. There can be little doubt Hammond’s children knew who their father was; however, based on the context of the letter it appears he was unwilling to verbally acknowledge that he fathered a number of his Black children. Perhaps what is most

striking about this passage is the ease with which multiple Southern Jewish gentlemen were able to confess that enslaved people of color could arise “in the family.” The letter also demonstrates how Jewish masters could have literally owned their own children during pre-abolition times—a relationship between master and slave that could radically alter family dynamics. In his book on Jews and slavery, historian Saul Friedman tells us that “where possible they [Jewish owners] commanded that slave families be kept intact.”\textsuperscript{747} Of course, enslaved blacks always were subject to being sold and/or their families being torn apart. But Hammond’s letter confirms Friedman’s record of some masters’ concern for their slaves’ familial cohesion. This issue deserves further attention, given it suggests that autonomous black Jewish families—even in Jewish households—may have functioned out of the public view of non-Jewish blacks and whites. In wills such as the one above, we are not only shown how much masters may have cared for their slaves, we are given more evidence of the impact slaves had on family life. According to Friedman, “Jewish masters instructed their heirs to treat their slaves ‘with lenity.’” They offered financial rewards to slaves who nursed them back to health and those who tended family graves.”\textsuperscript{748} If Friedman’s assertion is correct, it means slaves were involved in the maintenance of not only household health and property, but Jewish genealogical knowledge as well.

In most treatments of Jews and slavery, the assumed preservation of Jewish genealogical knowledge among African Americans has been predicated on the ability of

\textsuperscript{747} Friedman, Jews and the American Slave Trade, 136.

\textsuperscript{748} Ibid.
African American inheritors of that knowledge to convey it in ways that Jews of primarily European extraction could recognize. But based on our examination in the previous and present chapter, this assumption does not seem warranted. A great deal of subaltern evidence supports this conclusion. It is clear that it has been possible for African Americans to recognize Jewish genealogical traces in ways European Americans may not reciprocate or even understand very well. And for a variety of reasons, American Euro-Jews such as Hammond had little incentive to affirm the alterity of the extended families they created with the African Americans they owned. (We saw evidence of this in the last chapter through examining Dr. Korn’s exchanges with the Caribbean rabbis.) If our analysis has been correct, then the parameters of Afro-Jewish communal membership and autonomy could proceed historically along lines completely unacknowledged and misunderstood by the African American Jews’ own Euro-Jewish biological relatives. The tendencies suggested by these accounts painfully indicate the likelihood of such a possibility. African American Judaism could very well have emerged on the basis of black women’s resistance to their marginalization in pre-abolition (Euro-) Jewish and non-Jewish society. Whether in French, Dutch, Danish and English colonies, whether in Latin America or in the Caribbean, whenever Euro-Jews and Africans (of whatever background) were interacting with a high degree of professional, personal, physical intimacy, such as that attendant with colonial slavery, mulatto Jews and other blacks of Jewish ancestry appeared. Whether black women who maintained an oral tradition of Hebrew lineage from Africa, black women praying at Shearith Israel in New York, black female caretakers of Jewish families in Curacao, black domestic servants and/or “housekeepers” in Euro-Jewish households, black mistresses of Euro-
Jewish men such as Ashur ben Nathan or Jewish women of color completely excluded from publicly Jewish spaces altogether, it appears untenable that anyone can admit the presence of mulattos of Jewish descent and at the same time, deny the agency of the women of color in helping to constitute a black Jewish community’s historical appearance. Furthermore, these Jews of color may have found themselves struggling with questions of identity and membership in Euro-Jewish cultures still negotiating with American racial doctrines. In Hammond’s case, it is clear that he recognized some distinction between the slaves of Jewish descent (that is, “slavery in the family”) and the slaves of “Strangers.” But to what extent are we justified in saying that any African American descendants of Hammond may have recognized themselves as Jews in this way? This is the point at which I think a postcolonial phenomenology of African American religion can be most helpful.

Scholar of Africana religion Yvonne Chireau insists that African American religion and African American superstition have historically existed side by side. She contends that presuming the hermeneutical sufficiency of “religion” may not be appropriate for peoples whose spiritual practices presume the existence of unseen realms of sociality and undetected powers. “Magic,” according to Chireau, “is a particular approach or attitude by which humans interact with unseen powers or spiritual forces.” (italics mine)749 When magic is at work, such as in African American people’s spiritual traditions, a keen awareness of theological doctrines will not help elucidate their religious experiences. To understand black folks’ religious experiences, argues Chireau, one must

749 Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic*, 3
put aside ontological assumptions about the pre-ordained divisions between “Christian” and “non-Christian” realms. According to her understanding, therefore, this means Hammond’s children may have performed acts of African American magic by virtue of simply publicly professing their Jewish ancestry.\textsuperscript{750} For example, pouring libations to one’s ancestors could have signified something “unseen” to the black children of Hammond, in the sense that its meaning may have escaped the observation of their white relatives. Unbeknownst to white Jews, such an act may have constituted for black people a \textit{de facto} profession of their Jewish heritage, placing them in an affirmed alteritous relation to Hammond’s Jewish roots. The irony here is that such an affirmation of Jewishness could have taken place through the performance of rituals that were not acknowledged as “Jewish” rituals by European Jewry. This is a consideration that has particular significance for our study. After all, Hammond’s South Carolina plantation was not known as a place without its battles with the realm of the unknown. “The prominent proslavery ideologue,” writes Chireau,

Described his great frustration with the rampant destructiveness of Conjure practitioners on his estate, who had been involved in numerous incidents of vandalism, unauthorized doctoring, and theft of his personal property. Unsuccessfully, Hammond had tried to expose those who were involved with prohibited spiritual activities, but his slaves’ belief that they were supernaturally protected from his reprisals allowed them to thwart his attempts to dominate their collective wills. They had adopted a conceptual framework to which Hammond had no access.\textsuperscript{751}

\textsuperscript{750} Ibid., 4.

\textsuperscript{751} Ibid., 118.
Conjure (or “conjuring”) is the sacred and spiritual art of traditional African American magic. If conjurers (also known as “conja-men” and “conja-women”) worked their fixes on a plantation owned by a Jewish man with mixed-race children, those children could become particularly significant locations of African people’s spiritual power. Simply by virtue of being his children, therefore, Hammond’s mixed-race progeny could have the power to lift, perpetuate or forbid curses and/or other acts of magic committed against him and his descendants. As we imagined in the case of the establishment of Darhe Jesharim, this spiritual location could potentially inspire other blacks to align themselves with Jews of color in religiously provocative ways. In light of such observations, is it any wonder that after emancipation, black rabbis such as Wentworth Matthews of Harlem emerge, declaring that “Conjure, by the way, is a good word. Means compel. Here, I take this match and strike it and compel it to light… The word isn’t so bad.”\textsuperscript{752} For Hammond’s children and other people of color who inherited multi-layered traditions that together, made meanings out of their Afro-Jewish worldviews, being able to navigate in-between both European and African locations of spirituality represented a profound opportunity to live a meaningful life, despite the presence of a slaveholding, pre-abolition world. The implications here are profound for our understanding of American Jewish history. These insights suggest nothing less than the following likely conclusion: When viewed as ordinarily human, and thus ordinarily Jewish, it may be the case that African Americans claim to be Jews, Hebrews and Israelites for no reason other than the fact that

\textsuperscript{752} Brotz, The Black Jews of Harlem, 32.
they are Jews, Hebrews and Israelites (at least in the same sense that European American Jews may be ordinarily understood to be Jews).

I submit to the reader that these considerations, among others, may no longer be considered merely possible for my analysis of African American Jewish history. They are pre-given aspects of my social world, the world into which I was born and through which I continue to live and make meaning, both for my self and others with whom I co-constitute that world. The presence of ancestral whites in my family, ancestors we called “Jewish” people, functioned as something of a taboo topic during my childhood conversations with family elders. The older I became, the more I learned that the shame involved in discussing our white Jewish progenitors had as much to do with slavery as it did with race. About this point I should be clear. Not all the slave owners in my extended family were white, nor were all our family’s white members slave owners. My family emerged from a plethora of different ethnic and racial backgrounds, and so our ethnic “origins” should not be understood to primarily reside in any single one. But it did eventually become clear to me why discussing Jewish people was so difficult. My family, as I came to know it, could not possibly have existed unless intra-familial slavery, such as that found in Curacao or Jamaica or on Hammond’s plantation, was being practiced for generations. Sometimes white Jewish parents in our family (both mothers and fathers) simply disowned their mixed-race children, pretending as though time and distance might ameliorate the historical consequences if their Jewish children of color were quietly forgotten. The problem, of course, is that regardless of their choice to not acknowledge us, we consciously chose—and often to the incurrence of ridicule and mockery—to remember to acknowledge them. After all, they were our ancestors, and all
our ancestors deserve acknowledgement. But as a result, the rules of American racial signification took its toll by demanding that our white Jewish ancestors be referred to as “Jewish” and their mixed-race children be referred to as “Hebrews” and/or “Israelites.” Among these Hebrews one could count some of my grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc. The reader should also be aware that despite my repeated attempts for an explanation, the rationale or origin of these signifying practices was something I was never able to extract from most family elders before their passing, yet this subtle distinction between “Hebrew” and “Jewish” people in my family has been maintained until the present day. Having inherited this distinction, I can no longer speak about pre-abolition African American Jewish identities solely from the standpoint of raising possibilities. I instead find myself seriously questioning any quick attempt by any researcher to (1)—locate African American Jewry/Judaism’s emergence primarily in racial, as opposed to sex / gender dynamics; (2)—locate African American Jewry’s emergence primarily in post-abolition American history; or (3)—“locate” African American Jews at all. If evidence for the presence of African American Jews during slavery must, of necessity, be different in both quantity and quality from that found in post-abolition contexts, then this observation does not forbid a greater diversity in the type of evidence yielded by the two different contexts. The role of magic in enslaved African people’s spiritualities alone means focusing solely on post-abolition African American religious institutions may be profoundly limited in its potential for tracing the diverse ways in which Jews of color could have sanctified their cosmos during the pre-abolition period. Let us grant that over the centuries, many factors may have influenced the creation and sustainance of African American Jewish communities. But for my purposes here, I have tried to emphasize the
importance of one context of Afro-Jewish historicity among many: Jewish slavery “in the family.” The subaltern evidence yielded by these reflections begins to formulate a picture of one context out of which African American Judaism has arisen—not an ontological context, but a very powerful existential one. The lived experiences faced by actually existing African American Jews produced a matrix of concerns that, in the form of life options, constituted the transcendental conditions necessary for the possibility of meaningful valuations of behavior. This means that, whether or not the possible variations of Jewish racism raised in this chapter actually happened, their comprehensibility and meaningfulness raised issues of ultimate concern that African American Jews have repeatedly attempted to address since their earliest historical appearance.

A project to understand these issues of ultimate concern has yet to begin. I have tried to present what is, for me, a reasonable insight about the historical impact of Jewish participation in centuries of trans-Atlantic human trafficking. And I have tried do so while acknowledging the various historical possibilities that may have both arisen from and converged with such events. As far as my personal history is concerned, my familial and social location can be now be clarified. As a subaltern humanity, I cannot be understood as an ontological form. I exist as a reality that supervenes on my human being. This self-understanding is not rooted in signification chains or ontological equivalences or delineations of causality. The symbolic forms of my humanity, forms that have been denied by those very persons who I affirm as fellow human constituents of my social world, affirm who I may be. Hence if human beings engaged in the acts of human trafficking indicated above for centuries, then it is only logical and natural that
their descendants and kinfolk should bear markers of that history in the present day. For some, these markers will be indicated by family lore, and for others, it may be culture, and still for others, religion. But there is one thing we may reasonably agree to be certain. If the kind of slavery that permitted the historical onset of these familial, cultural and religious processes was rooted in racial phenotype, then the vast majority of those persons who bear the markers of this history will bear it in their bodies. And so it is this aspect, what Fanon once called the “lived experience of the black,” that constitutes the most relevant, on-going epistemological resource for humanistic research on Jews. More specifically, it is black people and their descendants, those embodying the markers of human trafficking, who comprise the most adequate “primary sources” for writing histories of African American Jewish / Hebrew / Israelite peoples and their kinfolk.

No historical scholarship that is resistant to racially ontological views can remain in denial of these facts. Yet despite these well-confirmed, well-known and well-documented facts, highly questionable readings of African American Jews’ and their kin peoples’ histories remain in circulation. Now that you, the reader, have been given a small glimpse at what I consider to be basic facts of American Jewish history, it is important for you to consider the summary of African American Israelite religious history below. Due to the influence of Brotz’s early work, the following litany has become a standard account of academic approaches to the historical origins of “Black Hebrews” and/or “Black Israelites” such as myself.

Rabbi Matthew’s movement represents one little-understood form of African American storefront religion during the “Great Migration”—the movement of Black Southerners to northern cities.
in the first half of the twentieth century. Black Israelites, also called Black Hebrews or Black Jews, are African Americans who believe they are descended from the ancient Hebrews and who practice religions that use some elements of Judaism. Metaphoric identification with the children of Israel and the Exodus narrative has long been an acknowledged feature of African American Christianity in the nineteenth century. However, from their origins in the 1890’s until the present, Black Israelites have moved from metaphoric identification to literal identification as the people of the Book. There were many sects of Black Jews during the 1920’s, from the South to Chicago and Harlem, and many of these had more members than Matthew’s Ethiopian Hebrews or gained more wealth and notoriety. But Matthew practiced a religion that preached descent from the ancient Israelites while pioneering the incorporation of Jewish ritual, Hebrew language, and kosher culinary practices.753

My personal narrative alone should bring into question the usefulness of a conceptual framework that demands African Americans “who believe they are descended from the ancient Hebrews… [shift] from metaphoric identification to literal identification as the people of the Book.” I wonder if such an analysis is an attempt to justify why “Black Jews” or “Black Hebrews” are not mundanely understood as ordinary Jews or ordinary Hebrews, without the (racial) signification fallacy? Not only does it seem that this analysis is unwarranted in cases such as the members of Darhe Jesharim, black women who prayed in Shearith Israel in the 1850’s, enslaved Africans who “became Jewish” like their Haitian owners, freed persons previously owned by Jews or the many enslaved Africans of Hebrew ancestry who were trafficked across the Atlantic, I am tempted to inquire whether in instances such as these, advocates of the identification narrative would

make the classic (and racist) “appeal to exceptional cases.” If our study here has been successful, the various presumptions behind the quote above should all be brought into question: the primacy of “African American” as racial signifier in constructions of “Black Israelite” identity; the descriptive adequacy of the “Black Israelite” label; the presumption of Black “belief” in their ancestral heritage as opposed to the presumably-creolized-and-already-mixed spiritual traditions of “Jews,” “Israelites,” “Hebrews,” “Torah,” and/or “Judaism” of various racial assignments across various intercontinental Diasporas; the “identification” theory of black people’s self-understanding amidst the presumed coherence and theoretical authenticity of (read: European / White / masculinist / rabbinic) “Jewish ritual”; the late location of African American Jewish “origins” in the 1890’s as opposed to the 1600’s or earlier or (more accurately) in primordial liturgical spaces; the ontologization of “African American Christianity”; the assumption that these ontological Afro-Christians could not have themselves been of Hebrew ancestry and thus transvestively articulating one or both traditions privately while “passing” in another tradition publicly; the conceptual adequacy of “religion” and/or “preaching” through a creedal, not a liturgical, formula; the lack of attention to conjoined, pre-abolition African familial and Jewish familial narratives… and the list goes on. In the future, an appreciation and acknowledgement of the role slavery, interracial intimacy and American

754 Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, 70; it is important for me to acknowledge that my familial narrative of Hebrew descent is not rare in our community. Unfortunately, this is a point that researchers often may neglect. One of the impacts of the insider/outsider debate in religious studies can be seen in the willingness people have to share what, in effect, are narratives involving shame and sexual violence. I, for one, have been personally ashamed at what amounts, in some such requests for data, to an appeal for archival documentation of sexual violence in order for certain narratives to be admitted as historical in the scholarship.
Jewish antiblack racism played in the formation and maintenance of various Afro-Israelite societies can and should provide evidence that multiple routes to various kinds of Israelite identities can be found in the artifactual record. But these “multiple routes” need not and should not be understood as permission to authenticate identities by locating them in multitudinous ontological specifications. The effort to avoid essentializing does not begin by essentializing attributes in the ignorance of substance. There is a way to speak meaningfully about identities without assuming identities must be the way they are presently conceived. And thus one may construct histories of Jews without those histories succumbing to ontological norms of Jewishness. In effect, this means that one must approach African American Jewry with the same set of conditions on social research that one would use to approach European, European American and other kinds of Jewries—assuming a creolization of bodies, experiences and manners of expressing Hebrew heritages.

Let’s review what we have covered so far.

In the second chapter, I articulated a vocabulary for identifying various ontological fallacies that could attend the social problem of human scientific method. Among these were notions of signification, theology, exoticism, relevance, evidence, strong bad faith, weak bad faith, affirmation, denial, subalternity, anonymity and macro- and micro-institutional relations.

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Up until this point, the procedure by which I have chosen to extract new evidence has been composed of three basic Fanonian / Gordonian phenomenological reductions. In the first half of chapter three, I performed the first of these three reductions. I used Lewis Gordon’s postcolonial phenomenology of object analysis to draw a distinction between artifacts and evidence, thereby raising the possibility that investigators of human phenomena could examine a great deal of artifacts and yet see no evidence. I suggested that this has happened in previous studies of African American Jewish history, and that if future researchers were going to avoid the social problem of the human sciences in their study of Africana Judaisms, then they would have to laboriously extract historical possibilities from the extant artifacts available. This kind of labor would minimize phobogenic reactions to artifacts and pose new challenges for theorists of human reality who seek to transcend ontological descriptions of human presence.

The second phenomenological reduction was performed in the second half of chapter three, and it amounted to a teleological suspension of the prevailing historiographies of race and gender in American Jewish history. In other words, upon pointing out the limitations of Bertram Korn’s decision to adopt racially exclusive research methods, I subjected his methods to critical inquiry by phenomenologically suspending their presumed adequacy and coherence. In addition to Korn’s methodological limitations, I also used the divisions between artifactuality and evidence to re-write the history of women’s involvement in congregational leadership in American Judaism. According to an understanding of Judaism proposed here, a formerly enslaved, African American Jewish evangelist named William Crowdy was ordaining women to lead and serve “Jewish” congregations as “Elders” over fifty years before the first female
would lead a congregation belonging to one of the three major Euro-American doctrinal streams in the United States. Hence examinations of the artifactual sources behind these episodes revealed attempts to police and imagine Jewish Studies scholarship inasmuch as it revealed new subjects that the scholarship could represent. It is these efforts to mask and hide the policing of scholarship that our phenomenology has attempted to expose and circumscribe. On the basis of the bracketing of Korn’s methodology and the proposal for non-traditional readings of American Jewish women’s history, I then suggested that a more in-depth counter-reading of antebellum American Jewish history could be possible. This new reading would be something akin to what I have performed in the present chapter.

In this chapter I performed a third phenomenological reduction. In it I demonstrated how a phenomenological approach to extracting subaltern evidence from extant artifacts could result in a dramatically different and non-ontological understanding of Africana Jewish and American Jewish histories. By examining primary and secondary sources for subaltern evidence of pre-abolition Jews of color, I hypothesized that slaves of Jews and their kin could reconstitute Jewish meaning and Jewish intent(s) by reflecting on the critical roles they played in the maintenance and constitution of creolized Jewish families. In so doing, I also argued that, even if one denies the historical existence of Jewish racism, the historical agency exercised by Jews of color could nevertheless be understood as meaningful through the appreciating the formative impact that narratives of

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The person I am referring to here is Paula Ackerman of Temple Beth Israel in Meridian, Mississippi. See Hasia R. Diner and Beryl Lieff Benderly, Her Works Praise Her: A History of Jewish Women in America from Colonial Times to the Present (New York: Basic, 2002), 338.
Jewish racism could have on African American Jewish consciousnesses. Through a phenomenological reduction of standard accounts of American Jewish history, I have therefore provided the reader with the conditions necessary to understand some fundamental dimensions of American Jewish history better than an appeal to Jewish theological beliefs alone may afford. Specifically, these conditions relate to the forms of patriarchal slavery practiced in colonial American Jewish families. However it should be clear that there are many others—Diasporic experiences, class relationships and various understandings of “American” identity, to name only a few. The evidence suggests that were each of these avenues explored for the phenomenological appearance of Jews on the basis of subaltern evidence, then the historical “picture” of American Jewry would appear much more diverse than dominant Jewish Studies scholarship has suggested. I have thus provided the reader with one case study in how postcolonial phenomenology could exemplify the origins, problems and consequences of ignoring the ontologization of human being in the study of Jewish humanity.
CHAPTER 5:
BEYOND ONTOLOGICAL JEWISHNESS: TOWARDS AN ABANDONMENT
OF AUTHENTICITY IN THE JEWISH AND HUMAN SCIENCES

Non-ontological Jewish presences are not only possible; they are actual. They are actualized every day in the world of ordinary human affairs. These non-ontological (read: existential) Jews and Judaisms rarely inform scholarship in the field of Jewish Studies, because locating them and corresponding with them often demands both a creative re-imagining and transcendence of the colonial understandings of Judaism through which most scholarship has been produced and marketed. In contrast to ontological humanity, I propose that historians foreground sites of ordinary humanity, sites and situations in which the lived social world allows human ordinariness to appear. There are many ways to do this. Ordinary Jewish humanity, for example, lives as a cypher. Living cyphers can be understood to resist the ontologies I have pointed out in this study. They can use spaces and places that propel human understanding forward without being confined to one definitive horizon of interpretation over another. In this way, subaltern histories can appear connected to a broader story of the human and Transcendent, the story in which all Jewish humanities inhere. But living Jewish cyphers are only the beginning. Ordinarily speaking, Jews continually experience creolization. This is not an appeal to multiculturalism or a similar sort of hybridity.

757 Gordon, Disciplinary Decadence, 45.

Creolization suggests a relationship to spatial and temporal valences that make it possible for a certain kind of consciousnesses to appear, a consciousness that is capable of reconciling and holding in tension the conflicting vectors of sociality that made the creolized person’s existence possible. What is usually neglected is the simple fact that as a rule, Jews appear in history as creoles. They are not only mixed, but their mixture appears from the background of conflicts involving greater and lesser political forces.

Creole Jewishness is also non-ontological Jewishness. But in addition to living Jewish texts and living Jewish creoles, there are other kinds as well. They may be more subtle, but once discovered, they reveal a much broader spectrum of Jewish humanity. Of these, I think one of the most important is the modal relation of Jewishness as it appears in history. This relation is what I call “supervenient Jewishness,” a non-ontological Jewishness that is a symbiotic mediation between the appearance of subaltern humanity as ordinary and the appearance of subaltern humanity as human at all. In the writings of Lewis Gordon, this mediation reveals itself as an important symptom of colonized humanity’s existential condition; it is a peculiarly racist kind of oppression. The basic premise here is that subaltern (or denied) humanity, including subaltern Jewishness, exists in a neocolonial social world by virtue of the ordinary supervening on humanity.


For example, the more historians consider Africana Jews as ordinary, the more Africana Jews’ humanity will appear. And the more human Africana Jews appear, the more inhuman their extraordinary appearance appears. This symbiosis constitutes a basic existential condition. When research on Africana Jews (or any other subaltern population, for that matter) ignores this condition, the research falls prey to concepts of ontological humanity rooted in the colonial natural attitude.\(^762\)

As I stated in the introduction, appreciating non-ontological Jewishness does not necessarily call for a thick description of the socio-religious significations informing African American Jews’ distinctive ideologies. One can set a historical narrative against a mammoth amount of background detail and still neglect basic features of your historical characters’ humanity. A plethora of facts need not entail human affirmation. In fact the opposite can be the case. Humanity can emerge through short, anecdotal stories meant to exhibit the existential categories of a person’s life: love of music, respect for one’s heritage, desires for liberation and suffering from oppression… all of these are recurring existential themes found in the life of humanity.\(^763\) This is not to argue that all subaltern peoples’ activities are made in affirmation of human existence. The point is that racist and colonial discourses have distorted human self-understanding to such a degree that even our sciences have too often blurred living, breathing humanities with colonial distortions of them. If black people lived during a time of profound racial and political repression directed against blacks, then foregrounding this situation as an extra-ordinary historical condition, not as a natural or taken-for-granted one, will allow the ordinary

\(^{762}\) Ibid., 62-63, 66.

\(^{763}\) Ibid., 10, 45, 46-47.
features of African American Jews’ and other subaltern peoples’ lived social worlds to appear.  

When historians take racism for granted, and instead of explicitly describing these structural impediments to human freedom, strengthen them by refusing to explicitly address their phenomenologically distinctive features, they insure that the original racial barriers to human striving, as well as their unintended after-effects, remain squarely in place. But if a historian proactively identifies those racial impediments by explicitly referring to how they function in the lives of oppressed people, a historical stage can at least be set on which it is possible for subaltern humanities to appear as ordinarily human, despite the extraordinary conditions under which they exist. Such an effort need not be an attempt to valorize the poor, heroicize the marginal or romanticize the downtrodden. Nor need it be an effort to resurrect Enlightenment discourses about liberalism and the citizen-subject of democracy. Rather, the goal for the historian is to make sure that, despite humanity being economically impoverished, culturally marginalized and/or spiritually downtrodden, it is nevertheless people’s ordinary humanity that remains visible throughout the historian’s research and writing.

For many scholars trained in conventional historiography, the methodological proposal to depict human being as ordinary and human oppressions as extraordinary may sound like a simplistic appeal to non-rigorous modes of artifactual interpretation. The problem with this objection, however, is that it does not bring the historical narratives of subaltern modes of human sociality to the fore. If it did, then the objection would immediately have to account for the fact that conventional histories of colonialism are

\footnote{764 For a few good examples of how this is done, see ibid., 40–42.}
premised precisely on the invisibility of those persons demanded to appear in documentation. Construing the goals of subaltern historicity as non-rigorous without raising the historical relevance of populations made invisible would therefore constitute a grave misunderstanding of the intent behind invoking subaltern people’s histories. It would be tantamount to both ignoring the role of thought in historiography and assisting in the ontologizing of history itself.  

According to Gordon, the project of understanding the importance of subaltern speech is itself tied to the historical effects of colonialism. He states the matter in the following way.

The historical problem faced by the Caribs and the many subsequent communities of color drawn to the Caribbean from different parts of the globe was that they had no say concerning their historic portrayal. It is not that they did not speak or protest. It was that the conditions for their words to be heard, for them to have a voice, were suppressed or ignored by their conquerors.

In this dissertation, I have appealed to a variety of aspects of pre-abolition American Jewish history in order to highlight a small set of “conditions” under which African American Hebrew and Israelite thought may be heard and understood.


766 Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence*, 122.
Unfortunately, there is an assumption among many historians that knowledge must move forward on the basis of self-definitions which function like completeness theorems. My approach here has begun with some questionable, yet common assumptions and has attempted to show a way forward in the scientific study of humanity by demonstrating how those assumptions are both limited and can yet be overcome. If my approach has been correct, then there are significant implications here for the degree to which the Jewish and human sciences must strive in order for their colonial manifestations to be largely transcended. But it is important to start by decentering that which has facilitated the disappearance of humanity from the scope of history. However, once these decenterings are initiated, their colonial configurations suspended, and ordinary humanity’s supervenient relation to Jewish humanity’s phenomenological appearance allowed to foreground the historical investigation, it should be recognized that a large number of Jewish and “Hebrew-oriented” peoples and their kinfolk may appear to the observer—a number many times that which is presently considered to populate the Jewish Diaspora. In addition, these peoples’ multiverse lineages may connect them to other globally Jewish and Hebrew metanarratives in ways deemed unorthodox and heretical to contemporary scholars in the Jewish and human sciences. This Jewish world, a Black / Hebrew / Israeli world of intellectual diversity and religious imagination, racial multiversity and subaltern spirituality, cultural creativity and supervenient humanity, is the world in which I was born and raised. And I know, not as a matter of empirical testing, nor as a matter of subjective dogma, but simply as a matter of experience, that there exist many others such as myself. At this point in time, I can only assume that as the political conditions change in order to make it safer for subaltern
humanities of various attitudes and histories to appear, then Her Majesty’s Other Jewish children will choose to do so in the manners that suit them and their situations most appropriately. But in the present historical moment, for purposes of nothing less than scientific accountability and the necessarily ethical dimensions of studying humanity, I will suspend any and all ontological judgments about who is or isn’t a real Jew and who should and should not be considered a historically authentic Jewish people. Critical scholarship calls for nothing less. Radical historical honesty calls for much, much more.
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