



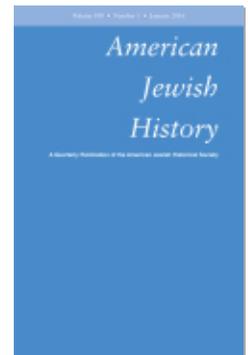
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Lewis R. Gordon

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Rarely Kosher:

Studying Jews of Color in North America

LEWIS R. GORDON

I offer in this article a brief exploration of some of the difficulties posed by the study of Jews of color, especially Afro-Jews, in the North American and Caribbean contexts, and I summarize the portrait of Jews today (and a little bit of yesterday) that follows from such study.

There is much to support the reluctance to conjoin discussions of Jews with discussions of race. This reluctance derives not only from the history of inquisitions, pogroms, and the Shoah, but also from the ironically intimate link between the concepts of race and Jewish history. The prototypical term *raza* from which the word “race” emerged was, after all, a Medieval Spanish word to refer to breeds of dogs, horses, Jews and Moors (Afro-Muslims).¹ We could add to this the upheavals marked by the transition of Christendom into a trans-Atlantic force in the fifteenth century and that of the term from its theological underpinnings to its naturalistic aspersions as a science of human division, an anthropology. It is no accident that the later “classic” modern formulation of racism, Arthur de Gobineau’s *Essai sur l’Inégalité des Races Humaine* (1853–1855), devoted attention to the mixed racial constitution of Jews, and it is also not accidental that a term developed by the French linguist Ernest Renan, “Semitic languages,” eventually became a racialized one: “Semite.” All this is familiar stuff to scholars, not only in the study of race but also in the study, specifically, of Jews.² This narrative is wanting, however, in many regards — first, because of its seamlessness, and, second, because it doesn’t address the question of why race arose as a negative concept.

1. See, e.g., Sebastian de Covarrubias Orozco, *Tesoro de la lengua castellana, o española* (1611), quoted, translated, and discussed in David Nirenberg, “Race and the Middle Ages: The Case of Spain and its Jews,” in *Rereading the Black Legend: The Discourses of Religious and Racial Difference in the Renaissance Empires*, eds. Margaret R. Greer, Walter D. Mignolo, and Maureen Quilligan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 71–87.

2. See, e.g., Lewis R. Gordon, Ramón Grosfoguel, and Eric Mielants (eds.), Special Issue: “Historicizing Anti-Semitism,” *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* VII, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 1–178.

To begin, there is already difficulty in talking about Jews because of the presumed universality of local manifestations of Jewish people. As Jews traveled through all parts of the globe, nearly every country developed some notion of Jews on the basis of its local Jewish population. This did not pose much of a problem in the past, since international, intercultural, and global communication was limited. But today, “local” versus “global” influence each other to the point of creating hegemonic forms of symbolic life. What is often lost, however, is an understanding of the history of how such dominant representations came into being. Jewish people are thus often studied without the important additions or conditions of how particular groups of Jewish people became representatives of all Jewish people.

This problem of the particular as universal comes to the fore in the study of what could be called “Jews of color.” Now, the term itself would seem odd to prior generations of Jews and antisemities, for both knew that Jews, or at least Judeans (see below), as a group, even when very light in complexion, were certainly not “white.”³ But race is permeable, and as some Jews became white, a misperception emerged, oddly enough, in which supposedly *most* Jews became white (or at least they were popularly perceived as such).⁴ As there were once no Jews who were white, this strange development means that large groups of nonwhite Jews simply disappeared, or at least disappeared *as Jews*.

The study of what remains in the fallout or disappearing of many Jews is thus fraught with minefields. Most of these are fallacies of presumed legitimacy of the status quo. Thus, the way things currently appear is retroactively placed on the way things were. What is missing, however, is a critical account of how such came to be. The African-American social theorist W.E.B. Du Bois identified this problem well in the study of people of African descent. In such study, the people were treated as problems instead of as human beings facing problems.⁵ This, as we know, is a

3. Even this claim requires qualification, since I ultimately argue that Jewish people were and continue to be what we would call today “multiracial.” See my discussion below of Jewish proselytizing in the ancient Roman Empire.

4. Historical studies of this phenomenon are emerging. See, e.g., Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998) and Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007). Oddly enough, the desire to be white is presumed to the point of its rarely ever being asked whether other groups of Jews became black. Cf. my discussion below of European Jews moving to the New World.

5. See W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Study of Negro Problems,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* XI (January 1898): 1–23. Reprinted in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 56 (March 2000): 13–27.

function of racism. As Jews are treated more as racialized than religious subjects, it follows that antisemitism takes a similar form, where Jews become problems instead of people who face problems.⁶ Put together, whether as Afro-Jews or simply as varieties of racially discriminated against groups who are also Jews, the methodological challenge that Du Bois identified comes to the fore.

This methodological problem is exacerbated by what I have elsewhere called disciplinary decadence.⁷ That phenomenon emerges when practitioners deify their disciplines and treat their methodologies as all encompassing or godlike in scope. Methodological fetishism results, where the researcher turns away from reality and treats the method as its replacement. Thus, if a group of people don't fit the discipline or make sense in terms of its methodology, such researchers wonder, "What's wrong with these people?" The result is an attempt to squeeze the people into the discipline or, worse, render the people nonexistent, instead of adjusting the discipline and its methods to the reality that exceeds them.

While these considerations pertain to what could be called Jews of color across the world, there is not enough time or space here to undertake discussion of such a scope. I will thus proceed simply by outlining some of the issues faced in North America and the Caribbean, which I hope will offer insight into the situation in other parts of the globe. Additionally, although the spectrum of color is very broad, I will focus on those that occasion the most anxiety and controversy since, as race discourses go, the tendency is to make the exception the rule with some groups and the rule the exception with others. Nowhere is this more so than with the study of blacks.

The Center for Afro-Jewish Studies at Temple University was among several institutions I founded or cofounded over the past decade.⁸ When-

For discussion, see Lewis R. Gordon, "Du Bois's Humanistic Philosophy of Human Sciences," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 568 (March 2000): 265–280 and Jane Anna Gordon, "Challenges Posed to Social-Scientific Method by the Study of Race" in *A Companion to African-American Studies*, edited by Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), pp. 279–304.

6. See, e.g., Lewis R. Gordon, Ramon Grosfóguel, and Eric Mielants, "Global Anti-Semitism in World-Historical Perspective: An Introduction," in *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* VII, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 1–14.

7. See Lewis R. Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Trying Times* (Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm Publishers, 2006).

8. Although I have now left Temple University, here was the site for the center: <http://www.temple.edu/isrst/Affiliates/CAJS.asp>. Research affiliates writing dissertations through the center included Walter Isaac, "Beyond Ontological Jewishness: A Philosophical Reflection on the Study of African American Jews and the Social Problems of the Jewish and

ever I mentioned its name, I was often asked, “Your center studies black and Jewish relations?”

“Relations” is one of those buzz words in American race politics. There are “race relations” and “relations between blacks and Jews.” Missing in all this, however, is the possibility of blacks who are Jews or Jews who are blacks. So, when I said, “No, we study and encourage research on Afro-Jews or black Jews,” the response was often, “Really?”

In time, however, the existence of a center that studied Afro-Jews became not only a source of pride among students and faculty at Temple University, but also a stimulus to a different kind of conversation about Jews and Jewish diversity. For instance, after speaking of Afro-Jews, I usually add that the center actually studied Jews in all our diversity. So I was then asked, “Why isn’t it called the Center for Jewish Diversity?” I often responded that what most American and European Jews mean by “Jewish diversity” is simply “Ashkenazim” and “Sephardim.” (Oddly enough, a speaker representing the Jewish Community Federation in San Francisco pointed out a few years ago at a meeting of the Institute for Jewish and Community Research that whenever she visited American Jewish institutions applying for funds to promote Jewish diversity, by “diversity,” they often meant the handicapped or white Jews with disabilities.)

I often responded to the effect that the Center for Afro-Jewish Studies is a name that forces people to think and to ask the right questions. They must consider Jews beyond European and Iberian Jews, and in some cases think what for them may be the unthinkable. And even more, it may lead to their asking about different types of Jews beyond Afro-Jews, such as East Asian Jews, East Indian Jews, Latin American Jews, Native American Jews, and more.” They invariably got the picture.

The discussion thus became what could be called a pedagogical moment, which, after all, is the goal of good research. In addition to helping people to realize the diversity of Jews today, the existence of the center evoked many questions. For example, “How did such diversity emerge?” and, “Were Jews always this diverse?”

Human Sciences” (Philadelphia: Doctoral Dissertation in Religion at Temple University, 2011) and Andre Key, “What’s My Name? An Autoethnography of the Problem of Ethnic Suffering and Moral Evil in Black Judaism” (Philadelphia: Doctoral Dissertation in African American Studies at Temple University, 2011). Articles on the center include Erin Mckigney’s “Professor Battles Preconceived Notions about Jews and Race,” the *Forward* (August 2007): <http://forward.com/culture/11326/professor-battles-preconceived-notions-about-jews-00255/>

An unfortunate aspect of the present is that although the second question is more to the truth, it is the first that is hegemonic. The truth of the second is well known among rabbis, which makes its erasure, at least among synagogue-going Jews, rather curious. Rabbinic Judaism emerged, after all, during the first third of the first millennium CE, after the fall of the Second Temple.⁹ Those years were marked by a transition of a colonized and, in today's terms, multiracial ethnic group, Judeans, who adopted a proselytizing approach through which 150,000 of them created 8,000,000 Jews in the Roman Empire.¹⁰ That the Roman Empire was multiracial is without doubt, since it spanned as far north as Britannia, as far south as the northern borders of the Sahara, as far west as Iberia, and as far east as Persia. What this already tells us is that Jewish history and its demographics take on a different picture if read through the lens of colonization and empire. That the groups who traded with, conquered, and colonized the land known today as Israel included Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, and Persians before Ancient Rome and the Holy Roman Empire/Christendom and then Arabians afterward make racial and cultural homogeneity a laughable prospect. But, even more, the fact that each empire or hegemonic group had Israelites as a minority group within its borders meant that those groups had an impact along with the emerging centers. Thus, the emergence of the Islamic empires meant a period of high visibility for Arabic-speaking Jews, the most influential example being Moshe ben Maimon or Moses Maimonides, also known as Mūsā ibn Maymūn and the RaMBam. The same emerged for Spanish Jews during the Spanish Empire, Dutch Jews during the Dutch Empire, and so on through to the British Empire and then to the hegemonic reach of the United States. Germany had its own colonial aspirations, diminished by World War I and then reasserted in World War II. But further, it is important to remember that a Western-centric portrait of hegemonic movements is only part of the story, and, as earlier Israelites and Jews of the Rabbinic Period moved to different parts of

9. There are many studies to attest to this fact, but consult, e.g., this group of historically informed rabbis: Shaye J.D. Cohen, *The Beginning of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1999). Harold M. Schulweis, *Finding Each Other in Judaism: Meditations on the Rites of Passage from Birth to Immortality* (N.Y.: UAH Press, 2001), especially p. 66; and Simon Glustrom, *The Myth and Reality of Judaism: 82 Misconceptions Set Straight* (West Orange, N.J.: Behrman House Publishers, 1989), especially p. 150. And there is, of course, Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (N.Y.: Vintage, 1955), which offers as many historical insights as psychological ones.

10. *Ibid.*

the world, their minority status in those areas followed a similar logic, whether it was through Ethiopia, Medieval Persia, India, or China. Add the vast trade networks across Africa, many of which linked, through ports, to Asia, and the story of past diversity is even more the norm.

So, how did the first notion of original Jewish whiteness become hegemonic? In a way, that story is already embedded in the second portrait: Jews in each empire became *the Jews*, and along with that designation came the epistemic edifice on which their dual identities as Jews and as members of their particular empires was forged. Thus, along with the logic of imperialism, there was also an anthropological appeal to its legitimacy. Christendom eventually became Europe, a place that didn't offer full citizenship to Jews. Its empires included the colonies of the Americas. Those colonies and the independent countries they subsequently became offered full citizenship on the basis of race. For Jews of Europe, the price for this opportunity was demonstrated whiteness.¹¹ As the logic of the colonized took the form of a profound antipathy toward those who were black, the whitening of Jewishness became such that my asserted conjunction — black *and* Jewish or Jewish *and* black — became oxymoronic.

So the Afro-Jewish question was born.

One of the curiosities of the Afro-Jewish question is that it is a question at all.¹² An understanding of Judaism makes the question of the convergence of people of African descent and Jewish people unremarkable. This is even more so as Jewishness diverged from ethno-racialism and more into religiosity. An Afro-Jew thus being an African-descended person who practices Judaism is of no consequence to this view.

But, as I have already pointed out through Du Bois, the issue isn't really about social practice. It is about identity, and, more specifically, *born identity*. For those concerned with the latter, the Afro-Jew who became such through conversion occasions a moment's exhale. The presumed homogeneous Jewish past needn't be rewritten for such individuals, though they pose a different question for the Jewish future, especially if that individual decides to marry or have children with someone Jewish (if male) or simply have children (if female). Whatever a Jewish identity was, conversion ensures that a Jewish future could be, at least at the level of racial identity, otherwise.

11. See Brodtkin, *op. cit.* and Goldstein, *op. cit.*

12. I offer a more elaborate discussion of this question in Lewis R. Gordon, "Réflexions sur la question afro-juive," *Plurielles: Revue culturelle et politique pour un judaïsme Humaniste et Laïque* N° 16 (2011): 75–82. http://www.ajhl.org/revue_plurielles.html

What is to be said, however, about Afro-Jews who are born Jews? In cases of European Jewish mothers, a similar moment of exhaling emerges in rabbinic Judaism. But what if the mother were Jewish but not of European ancestry? One response is to chart a genealogy that points either to Ashkenazic or Sephardic origins. But, again, what if the origins point neither to northern Europe (Ashkenazic) nor to southern Europe and North Africa (Sephardic)? Here, the expansion beyond the Ashkenazic/Sephardic presuppositions could bring in those descended from Mizrahim (Middle Eastern/West Asian Jews), but even that story becomes complicated, since, we should remember, groups often transform themselves as they migrate. (This is evident with Yemini Jews who migrated to the Horn of Africa and others who continued to southern Africa and became Lemba, and no doubt with Jews along the African trade routes whose descendants may include those among the Igbo of Nigeria and Kushite Jews of the Sudan and other parts of East Africa.) Given the effects of migration, perhaps entirely different kinds of Jews could have emerged, just as Ashkenazim actually came into being in northern Christendom and became dominant during the decline of the empires in which Sephardim had influence.¹³

Added to all this are the many denominations — Orthodox, Reform, Reconstruction, Progressive — and cultural considerations premised on secular identities. Then one must consider groups whose lineage and cultural connections (because pre-Roman and thus not necessarily “religious,” if we take seriously religion as a Roman creation) date back to the First Temple or to priestly Israelism, which is retroactively referred to today as Judaism. The difficulty there is that First Temple communities practiced patrilineality, whereas matrilineality emerged through the Romanized Judeanism that led to rabbinic Judaism. And, in some instances, there is the complex history of rabbinic Jews shaped primarily by migrating males who formed minyans, converted local women, and grew communities in remote areas. (Safe travel for females is, after all,

13. This is not unusual if one considers the descendants of Jewish groups along the Asian trade routes, each of which led to unique communities, such as the Bukharan Jews of Afghanistan (nearly extinct or in hiding, given the bellicose circumstances there); the Cochins, Meshuarim, Bene Israel, and Baghdadi Jews of India; and the Kaifeng Jews of China, just to name several. Interestingly enough, great resources with which to learn about these communities are Jewish cookbooks. See, e.g., Claudia Roden, *The Book of Jewish Food: An Odyssey from Samarkand to New York* (New York: Knopf, 1998). The growing literature on African Jews includes Daniel Lis, *Jewish Identity Among the Igbo of Nigeria: Israel's "Lost Tribe" and the Question of Belonging in the Jewish State* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2015).

still a challenging task.)¹⁴ All these come to the fore in the Americas, and they are becoming increasingly so in other parts of the world as continued migration, premised on a shrinking and heavily populated globe, leads, eventually, to Jews arriving in North America and Europe from different parts of the world with a story to be told but not yet immediately recognizable to hegemonic North American and European Jewish groups.

An additional consideration at this point is that of rejecting the expression “mainstream Jews.” Although not explicit, this term is fraught with problems. It’s a nicer expression than, say, “white Jews,” but, in the end, that’s pretty much what it means. Although some communities, such as the Orthodox Ashkenazim, may simply say halakhic Jews, the problems remain: (1) To use the term “non-halakhic” would simply be another way of saying that some avowed Jews are simply not Jews, and (2) some explanation would be needed for why some groups, such as Russian immigrants claiming to be Jews, don’t have to go through meticulous adherence to halakhic assessment versus communities of color from the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa. Brief discussions with Russian Jews would reveal stories of Russian Christians achieving immigration as Jews in Israel and in North America (through claims of being persecuted as Jews) over Afro-Jews who count back their Jewish ancestry and their adherence to Judaism for dozens of generations.¹⁵ This double standard is familiar stuff. We know it’s racist, although it is impolite to call it such. It certainly isn’t kosher.

A recurring error in the study of black people and religion is the presumption that Africans entered modernity through Christianization. Thus, even where Afro-Jews are found, the logical conclusion of this view is that they must have at some point been Christian. (The logic of modernization doesn’t work the same way with Afro-Muslims, since, as we have seen, the transition from Christendom to Modernity was premised on the suppression of Afro-Muslim presence in what is today southern Europe. The consequence of Islam as premodern continues in Islamophobic discussions to this day.)¹⁶ The Eastern European comparison

14. See, e.g., Siddharth Kara, *Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Slavery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). See also Jane Anna Gordon, *A Theory of Contemporary Slavery* (forthcoming).

15. Russian Jews, e.g., don’t receive the level of scrutiny and suspicion that Jews of color receive. I’ve known many who even wore crucifixes and nearly none who could offer rabbinic evidence of their authenticity. As with many Jews in the Global South, family history continues to be the basis of authentic membership.

16. For more discussion, see Gordon, Grosfoguel, and Mielants, *op. cit.*, pp. 3–4. Cf. also Paul Johnson’s *A History of the Jews* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), which recounts Jews paying ransom for Jews abducted during the slave trades (Islamic and Atlantic).

raises the question of why they weren't also presumed to have entered modernity through Christianization, especially since they were more certainly located in what was Christendom. As there were premodern Christian Africans in East Africa and wherever there were trade routes, in addition to the routes governed by Muslims, so, too, there were premodern Jews in those areas if only in the historic role of Jews serving as mediators, translators, and negotiators between Christians and Muslims.

These considerations raise many challenges for Jewish demography and historiography. Anyone working in this area of research knows there is an obsession with "the numbers." How one counts Jews depends, however, on who *appears* as a Jew, and here the difficulty is worsened by some of the factors I have outlined. The late Jewish social researcher Gary Tobin challenged many assumptions of Jewish demography in the United States and argued that there was a much larger population of color than many previous studies had claimed.¹⁷ The Jewish Community Federation's recent studies reveal that Tobin was correct, and this has raised the question of the validity and scope not only of previous research but also of those currently underway.¹⁸ Have the criteria and methods been properly scrutinized? A case in point: I have found myself in many situations in which I was invited to speak at events as a black person along with other black people or people of color only to discover at the moment of presentation that we all turned out to be Jews. During one meeting that took place in Mexico City, my Jewish colleagues and I went to a famous restaurant without Judaism being our main concern, since my colleagues were secular Jews. The restaurant, full of what we would call Jews, also had a table of recent European immigrants who were Orthodox Jews. Oddly enough, everyone was there for the same reason, yet from different motives. The place was kosher, but the secular Jews, who weren't thinking about that, were there simply because they liked the place. For them, *kashrut* was a way of living instead of an obligation. It struck us that the majority population in the restaurant, most of whom were from Jewish communities going back several hundred years, would probably not have been counted in a study premised on

17. See, e.g., Gary A. Tobin and Sid Groeneman, *Surveying the Jewish Population in the United States — Part 1: Population Estimate, Part 2: Methodological Issues & Challenges* (San Francisco, Calif.: Institute for Jewish & Community Research, 2004); also see Diane Kaufmann Tobin, Gary A. Tobin, and Scott Rubin, *In Every Tongue: The Racial & Ethnic Diversity of the Jewish People* (San Francisco, Calif.: Institute for Jewish & Community Research, 2005).

18. See *The Jewish Community Study of New York: 2011*: <http://www.ujafedny.org/who-we-are/our-mission/jewish-community-study-of-new-york-2011/>

criteria that would have defined only the recent European immigrants as Jews. The historic Latin American and Caribbean Jewish populations were therefore hidden in proverbial plain sight.

This problem of invisibility is exacerbated by how race plays itself out in the New World and in colonies in other parts of the globe. Attempts to expand the white populations in settler societies such as Argentina in the south and the United States in the north meant welcoming, albeit with suspicion, people who were not white enough in Europe. Those people often became white in the colonies. Jews, however, faced a complex set of options and choices, interestingly enough, in line with Gobineau's assertion of us as "mulattoes."¹⁹ While there were European Jewish immigrants who sought full citizenship through, in effect, becoming white in settler societies, there were also those who became members of creolized, colored, or black communities since the conception of being colored or black was very broad. Among the many stories of Jewish ancestry I received during my years of directing the Center for Afro-Jewish Studies were those of grandparents and great-grandparents from Europe who had settled in majority black neighborhoods and who simply "became" black. As far as their descendants knew, those ancestors were simply light-skinned or olive-skinned black people. I have often quipped that old photographs of so-called black and Jewish activism, where many of the blacks were simply light-skinned black people and many of the Jews were simply olive-skinned Jews, were such that most people today cannot tell who were the blacks and who were the European Jews. My own maternal ancestry is such that my Irish Jewish Sephardic ancestors were simply known as light-skinned Jamaicans; my Palestinian Jewish (because of nineteenth-century migration) Mizrahi ones were known as the same; and even my stepfather, a light-skinned Jamaican, revealed he was (Ashkenazi) Jewish at the time of my mother's death. Until then, we only knew of him as anti-religious. I have received testimonies from African Americans who suddenly found European Jewish people showing up at the funerals of relatives, and, in each instance, the family resemblance was palpable.²⁰

19. Interestingly enough, although Jews were in North America from the period of Dutch settlement in the seventeenth century, the first record of someone explicitly identified as Jewish was of a man named Sollomon who was also identified in the New Hampshire court records of 1668 as a "mulatto." See Abram V. Goodman, *American Overture: Jewish Rights in Colonial Times* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1947), p. 16, and Graenum Berger's derisive discussion in *Black Jews in America: A Documentary with Commentary* (New York: Commission on Synagogue Relations/ Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, 1978), pp. 11–12.

20. Walter Isaac's dissertation, "White Jews, Black Hebrews" (2011) offers many accounts and references to readings with similar tales.

The clear counsel, then, is to develop research criteria and methods that facilitate the appearance of communities. It would be good, for example, for Jewish researchers to begin learning about Jewish communities beyond their own. We could call this a *relational* form of research, where the connectedness and differences are brought to the fore. The differences are important here because of an important feature of research in the human sciences: No human community is complete. Authenticity is therefore an imposed condition on the human world, which raises a paradox: The failure to be authentic is perhaps the most authentic human condition. Research in the human sciences therefore works with a “more or less” model of assessment. This means that Jews are more or less where the researcher expects us to be and, because of “less,” also where we may not be expected to be. I could say, having traveled across most of the globe except for Antarctica, that Jews are everywhere. So, logically speaking, if one wants to find dark-skinned Jews, it stands to reason that one should go to places where there are many dark-skinned people. Jews will no doubt be among them.

There is, as well, much to be learned through knowledge of *halakha* and race, and how both were manifested in the complex history of colonization that was not only faced by Jewish peoples, but also marked by Jewish participation in such enterprises. Just as Roman colonization led to a transformation and expansion of the people of Judah into a community of millions of people known as Jews, so, too, did other periods of colonization lead to once-non-Jewish peoples being transformed into Jews. The existence of Jewish (Ashkenazic, Sephardic, and Mizrahic) plantations and slave masters in the colonies of Africa, Asia, and the Americas raises the question of the extent to which they were, if the expression is appropriate, kosher. If so, this would mean that their slaves, many of whom were their biological offspring, lived under *halakha*, which would mean that they should have been fully recognized as Jews when they were freed.²¹ This, in fact, happened in some places and was denied in others. Those formerly enslaved only knew the Jewish way of life, however, and their condition of post-slavery often led to forms of isolation in which unique forms of Afro-Judaisms or Amero-Indian-Judaisms were practiced. Descendants of those people are manifold across the former colonies. Some have created unique communities under the designation of Israelites or Hebrew-Israelites. A good researcher should,

21. This practice went through debate and transformations from Talmudic writings and subsequent commentaries. See, e.g., Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (New York: MacMillan, 1919).

as Walter Isaac has recommended, engage these forms of Judaism or Israelism as part of a Jewish resurgence and growth in the New World.²²

Tobin's argument did not stop, however, at his critique of methods of Jewish demography. He was also prescriptive in the form of actively encouraging conversion in order to grow Jewish communities.²³ This means not only reminding Jews of our proselytizing past, interrupted by edicts from the Emperor Constantine, but also encouraging us to be welcoming of those brought to Judaism, many of whom refer to themselves in the United States as "Jews by choice."²⁴ Much here depends on the hospitality of congregations and the commitment of rabbis. Those dynamics are unfolding at the time of the publication of this article.

22. See Walter Isaac, *op. cit.* and also his chapter, "Locating Afro-American Judaism: A Critique of White Normativity," in Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (eds.), *A Companion to African-American Studies* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), pp. 512-542.

23. See Gary A. Tobin, *Opening the Gates: How Proactive Conversion Can Revitalize the Jewish Community* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey Bass Publishers, 1999).

24. Cf. Patrik Jonsson, "More Blacks Explore Judaism," *the Christian Science Monitor* (July 17, 2008): http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2008/0717/p03s05-ussc.html?nav=topic-tag_topic_page-storyList. Consult also information on the Jewish think tank organized by Dianne Kaufmann Tobin and Gary A. Tobin, Be'chol Lashon (In Every Tongue), which is perhaps the best single resource on the diversity of Jews in North America and the Americas: <http://bechollashon.org/>. Cf. also the Union of Jewish Congregations of Latin America and the Caribbean: <http://www.ujcl.org/>. And, finally, though not exhaustively, see Stuart Z. Charmé's insightful article, "Newly Found Jews and the Politics of Recognition," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 2 (June 2012): 387-410, reprinted in: <http://www.bechollashon.org/media/news/5-15-2012-2.php>.