

Bruce Haynes – Talk on Jews and Afro Jews

Please note: These comments are based on research from my book *The Soul of Judaism. Jews of African Descent in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

The literary critic Edward Said re-conceptualized the term Orientalism to characterize the set of power relationships and hegemonic ideas about human difference.

The civilized masculinized Occident was contrasted to the backwards unchanging feminized Orient.

In Venice, during the early modern era, Jews were Orientalized and classified as a type, and the Jewish body—at once seductive and defiling—contained the “lure of the Oriental” and became a signifier of a stigmatized master status.

The shift from Jewish stigma of “Christ killers” to the Jewish body itself significant.

These ideas informed early 20th century Jewish identity formation in U.S., as scientific racism rekindled old anxieties regarding the Jewish body.

“[F]or Christian Americans, *all* Jews were Eastern and Oriental, and thus ‘raced’ as Hebrew or Israelite” (Fernheimer 2014)

Thus by the eighteenth-century image of “the Jew” as Oriental--backward and parasitic and racial was widespread.). Lamarckian science competed with the social Darwinism of the nineteenth century.

Africans were collectively seen as a natural race, unchanged by time, while Jews and Mexicans were understood to be *historic races*, groups whose genetic makeup had been transformed over time by climate and geography (Hattam 2007, 24-25).

As we entered 19th century, notions of civilized/savage and east/west gave way to categorical differences between white and non-white (Said 1978).

Jews ultimately escaped the solidification of America’s one drop rule and the “tribal stigma of race” by adopting the “**ethnic,**” a term which asserted a pluralistic, fluid, hyphenated identity—

As scientific racism rekindled old anxieties about the Jewish body, Jews engaged in what Omi and Winant have called **racial projects** by asserting an ethnic ie: white identity as they navigated the color line.

And while they escaped “the tribal stigma of race” by expressing identity as **ethnicity**—they also helped to justify the distribution of resources along a white/black binary of the color line as peoples of African descent, regardless of culture or ancestry, were collapsed into one fixed immutable category: Negro/Black which signified permanent outsider status.

- Ethnicity framework allowed millions of Eastern European Jewish immigrants to “become” white

- In conjunction with the solidification of the one drop rule, the notion of ethnicity reinforced perceptions that all Jews are of European descent, and thus white, thereby limiting the ability of black Jews and Hebrew Israelites to assert their claims as Jews.