



Compte rendu de la 73^e séance

Black Jews in America: a retrospective ethnography approach

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It's a rather unusual topic our seminar is tackling today, black Jews in America. Unusual because usually in Europe and the US Jews are seen as part of the white population while post-colonial and critical race studies emphasize more than ever their « whiteness ». So just the simple association of « black » and « Jew » questions and this makes it all the more interesting to study. In the past years, in the States, a rising number of people of African descent define themselves, identify themselves, as Jews because of their family, because they converted, because they think that the first Jews were coming from Africa. And it blurs the usual racial, religious boundaries.

To speak of this issue, we invited Bruce D. Haynes, professor of sociology at the University of California. And the first thing I'll say will be I warmly thank him for getting up early for us because there are nine hours difference between California and Paris, France. Bruce is a specialist of ethnic, racial relations, urban communities and

segregation and he has written many books on these topics such as from *Red Lines, Black Spaces to Down the staircase, three generation of a Harlem family* written with his wife, Syma Solowitch. But the book we are interested in today is the one I hold in my hands, *The Soul of Judaism, Jews of African descent in America*¹.

The historian Edith Bruder would have been the perfect discussant for Bruce as she has been working for a longtime on Black Jews², but I could not reach her in time so I'll open the discussion, looking at your work from the perspective of my own research on racism, antisemitism, and more broadly intercultural, interreligious relations.

Bruce Haynes

Thank you so much for the warm introduction and for the invitation to be with you, this evening for you and morning for me. I'm excited to be here to talk about the social science dilemma of methodology. What do we mean by ethnography and what are some of the limits of ethnography? I'm going to talk a little bit about what I call retrospective ethnography. You might say that it's a term that I coined out of necessity, because I started a project that gave me a lot of information, a lot of data that I didn't know what to do with.

The book that I'm going to be speaking about and the research for that book is called *The Soul of Judaism, Jews of African Descent in America*. Originally, I wanted to call the book Hear, O Israel.

For those who know anything about Judaism, Hear O Israel is the beginning of an important prayer called the Shema. And it is a "double entente", I guess, in terms of African Americans or people of African descent who were Jewish who felt they were not being heard in some ways.

¹ Bruce D. Haynes, *The Soul of Judaism: Jews of African Descent in America*, New York University Press, 2018; *Down the Up Staircase: Three Generations of a Harlem Family*, Columbia University Press, 2017 (with Syma Solovitch) and "A member of the club? How Black Jews negotiate Black anti-semitism and Jewish racism". pp. 147-166 in *Race, Color, Identity: Rethinking Discourses about the "Jews" in the 21st Century*. Efraim Sicher (Ed.), Berghahn Books; *Red lines, Black spaces: The Politics of Race and Space in a Black Middle-Class Suburb*, Yale University Press, 2006.

² Edith Bruder, *Black Jews. Juifs noirs d'Afrique et le mythe des tribu perdues*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2014 ; *Juifs d'ailleurs : diasporas oubliées, identités singulière* (dir.), Albin Michel, 2020.

And so that was the title that I wanted. But the press didn't like that for two reasons. One, it didn't have race in the title. They said they couldn't market this book to scholars because they needed race in the title. So I spent many, many hours trying to decide how I could reframe the book. We came up with "The Soul of Judaism". It wasn't my favorite title, to be honest. This is a press title.

I much preferred Hear O Israel. It had much more meaning both to the Jews of African descent who I interviewed and to the Jewish community, at least the religious part of the Jewish community. That being said, you can see right from the beginning, the question about race, how I'm going to talk about race, was central for me.

Also, this question about racism, I've always been fascinated as an Afro-American in the United States, in how Jews and Afro-Americans engage in civil rights movement. Jews helped found the NAACP, for example. And people often talk about Jews as different. In New York City, I grew up in the Harlem community in New York. And the way New Yorkers, Black New Yorkers talk about the different groups in the city, you have Italians, you have Greeks, and Jews stood out unlike other groups, I always found that also a curiosity.

So why were Jews singled out from other, quote, "white Americans"? And what did that conversation have to do with Black people? Why were Jews interested in this civil rights thing? What is this relationship, quote, unquote? Lots of scholars were writing about it during the 1990s when I first started to think about Jews of African descent. And in fact, scholars that were saying that, basically, the romance was over between Blacks and Jews, that the civil rights alliance was dead, and Blacks were in a different political place than Jews, and that historic alliance was broken. And I was in Jewish spaces, meeting Black people who said they were Jewish. So now I'm trying to figure out, how is this possible? Because the media and commentators are basically saying, you have Black people over here, you have Jewish people over here. They had this historic relationship. Now it's broken. But I'm running into people who say, well, I'm Black and I'm Jewish.

When I first started with my project, one of the first challenges is figuring out, who is Jewish? And what does it mean to be a Jew, which is an identity? And what does being a Jew have to do with Judaism, which is a religion? Those are kind of sticky questions,

because I wanted to see that in a Jewish context, it was variable whom Jews considered to be Jewish. So for me, this is challenging. Some people said these people were not real Jews. Other people said I'm a Jew. And other people said, well, they might be Jewish, but they're not doing it properly, or in an orthodox way, or in a traditional way. And so there are lots of boundaries. People are saying, well, this is the right way to be Jewish, this is the wrong way to be Jewish. So I use this working definition that a Jew is someone who both considers him or herself to be Jewish, but who is also considered Jewish by the relevant other people that they want to be a part of. Because I learned very quickly that Judaism is different from other religions. And membership is different, and the way boundaries of inclusion are defined are a bit different.

So within the field of sociology, when you entered into the literature on ethnicity and race, I saw this hodgepodge of people saying, well, Jews, they were an ethnic group, they're a religious group, but they're also a national identity, and they might be a race. I'm not sure what that meant, because you had this racial discourse that was taking place. People also said they were a tribe, they were a people. There are all these multiple terms that were used to define Jews. Okay, that was one challenge I had, like who were Jews and who got to be included and who got to define who was a Jew? And then there's a question about race, because the media was saying that Jews and Blacks were separate people, separate identities, separate groups that did not overlap.

And so I thought, well, what are the assumptions of presuming mutual exclusivity between Black people and Jewish people when I'm actually in places where I'm actually literally meeting Black Jews?

Societies make up rules for determining membership. So, defining who is Black, just like defining who is Jewish, is a social, not a biological process. So, once you sort of take that as a given, I started wondering how were the boundaries of Blackness and Jewishness, how did they come to take the forms that they were taking in America today? And how did that shape the people who were saying that they were holding on to both of these identities, that they were Black and that they were Jewish?

I met a lot of people through joining a synagogue with my wife. So I'll give you a little bit about my background. I was born and raised in Harlem community, from two middle class worker parents. I grew up in a segregated urban context in America. Large numbers of Jews live in New York City. I met lots of Jews. I went to a predominantly prep school that had lots of Jewish kids, had Jewish friends growing up. And I never really took much interest in thinking about Jews until 1995. I was now getting my PhD from CUNY Graduate Center. I was studying segregation and race in the suburbs. And I recently got married to a woman, my co-author, Syma Solovitch. Well, Syma Solovitch, you might recognize, maybe not, but it is a very Jewish name. So, I found myself married to a Jewish woman, moving to New Haven, leaving New York. And she said, well, you know, there are no Jews here. I needed to join a synagogue. She was not a religious Jew when we got married. She was a typical American Jew who did high holidays and that was pretty much her Jewishness. But once she left the Jewish context, she had the desire to connect communally to the Jewish community. So, we joined a synagogue. Nothing that I ever thought I would do. I joined the synagogue with my wife as a non-Jew. And now I'm a Black guy from New York City hanging out in a conservative synagogue in New Haven, where a number of Yale faculty members, for instance, from Jewish studies, taught like the, some of the classes on Judaism in the synagogue. So my entry, my first entrance and sort of entree into Judaism was pretty scholarly. I had this awesome resource of great scholars where I could ask a million questions. So, I started asking questions.

I started meeting Black Jews and I started thinking about, maybe I should interview these people to see how they manage to exist in a world where people say they don't exist essentially. That became my project. That was 1998. You'll notice, my book was published in 2018, 20 years later.

I set out to do what I would encourage no graduate student to do, which is collect data on a topic that I didn't know where it was going. I was meeting all types of people who said they had Black and Jewish identities, fitting within the mainstream Jewish community, or Orthodox Judaism, or Reform Judaism, or Reconstructionism. But then there are others who fell outside of those boundaries, who still said that they had Jewish identities. And so now I have this hodgepodge of people who all say they're Black and Jewish. It's sort of all over the map, my sample. There's nothing that really kind of holds it together.

And yet I talked to everybody, because my topic was not about race, I didn't go in asking them, you know, tell me what you think about your racial identity. I went in asking them to tell me about who you are, and your sense of self, and race and religion were the things that they wanted to talk about. And they were raising questions that I didn't have answers for. I had people in categories in different communities who were all talking about being Jewish in one way, shape or form, but who were also using race as a center grounding for how they talked about Judaism. So that became a curiosity. Why were these people talking about race? Race has nothing to do with being Jewish, supposedly, it seemed to me. So, my project became trying to understand why some of these people, like Joab and Washington, were becoming more visible.

Today, there are groups like the Jews of Color Initiative that have organized as self-identified Jews of color. Some of them are Jews of African descent, and some of them are Latin Jews or Mexican Jews or Asian American Jews. These groups that have been classified as non-white have collectively come together to say, wait, you know, we have issues that we want to be seen within the Jewish community. So there has been this emerging of a movement, you might say. And you might say my interviews captured some of that emerging of a movement. It did so because in the late 1990s, when I started my interviews, a number of things were taking place that it would be hard to kind of put together without looking in hindsight. For example, we had a growth of the internet and online communities.

And in fact, I was able to-it's 1998- meet some of my first Jews of African descent by going online. I found them online, they had websites, they had blogs. They said, oh, wow, you're interested in Jews of African descent? I have a story to tell. Then they would say, well, do you know other people? And I say, oh, yes I know. And then it became an interesting network link, linking black Jews in some parts of the country to other black Jews. This became a kind of curiosity because I was meeting this group of black Jews through a snowball sample. I meet a few black Jews and say, do you know anybody else who is of African descent who identifies as Jewish? They will say, you know, I happen to know a friend, etc., etc. So this took me literally around the country.

At the same time, the Israeli airlifts were taking place. There was a sudden visibility of Ethiopian Jews in the 1980s, people were now talking about black Jews. If you looked e.g. at the New York Times, there were conversations that hadn't existed before.

Suddenly black Jews are something real and they're Ethiopian, suddenly they are popular. People know that these black Jews exist.

Before there was a small group of people who were paying attention to these Ethiopian Jews, but most of them tended to be activists back in the 1950s and 60s. The airlifts really placed the Ethiopian Jews into the international spotlight. They became sort of the representation of black Jews on a global scale.

And then in 1965, the United States change their immigration policy. Before 1965, most immigrants came from Northern and Central and Eastern Europe. But beginning in 65, there was a shift in policy that leveled the playing field and America started seeing many, many more immigrants coming from the global South. That means many more darker complexioned immigrants who were Jewish, like the Yemenite Jews. So just to recap, the 1990s, the growth of the internet, Jews of African descent and other Jews of color are able to network, ironically, just like white supremacists, on the internet. These people were able to network on the internet in a more positive light to find one another. The Israeli airlifts made black Jews a household topic, so to speak, in America, and brought attention to the fact that there were Jews who were not white. And the immigration of Jews from the global South and other immigrants in the global South that included Jewish immigrants also changed the "complexion" of the American Jewish community, quite literally.

That combined with a number of other evolutions taking place. During the 1990s, there was a growing multiracial movement in the United States. More parents of multiracial children, because after 1970, there was an increase in multiracial mixed-race marriages. By the 1990s, we had the offspring of those marriages and parents wanting their children to be recognized by the census, petitioning the Census Bureau to change their classification. Suddenly people had the possibility to claim multiracial identities. It's not that we didn't have multiracial people in the past, we certainly did, but we did not have the social space to claim a multiracial identity. That was something very new in the 1990s. There was a growth in cross-cultural, cross-racial adoption. I actually knew some gay men who were Jewish in the Bay Area, who were adopting black children and raising them in the Jewish context. A wide variety of individuals were engaged in cross-racial, cross-cultural adoption. And suddenly you saw mixed families. Out here in California, it's actually quite common for people today to have someone of

a different race in their immediate family. That was not necessarily true 25 years ago.

I'm in the Bay Area, wedged between San Francisco and Sacramento, which is Northern California. This particular region has more multiracial people than any other place in the nation. So, it is quite common to see mixed families. And my wife and I, who are Jewish, no one ever looks at us, any place we go. We are just sort of the norm here in Northern California, which is quite different than in other parts of the country.

There was also increased visibility of African heritage Jews who identified as Jewish, as Ethiopian, as possibly Hebrew-Israelite. I'll talk about that in a little more detail, maybe in the Q & A section.

And then there were Jews of Caribbean Jewish descent who began to take interest in some of their Jewish ancestry. That overlapped with these African heritage Jews, some of whom were trying to reclaim their connection to their Jewish history. You saw an interesting mix of Jewish-influenced identities coming out of Black segregated contexts in the U.S. And so it made an entire movement, some referred to as a Hebrew-Israelite community. I'm not quite sure I would think of it as a movement so much as a group of different religious groups that have emerged, that are loosely tied together, that claim some sort of descent or connection to their Jewish ancestry. Some of them have direct links and can demonstrate this. Many others have a more metaphorical connection. And there are scholars who have written about those kinds of metaphorical connections within Black religiosity that overlaps with the Christian church as well.

With all that, thinking about who holds these identities as Black and Jewish in America, and how do people negotiate being part of groups that society considers to be mutually exclusive, i.e. Jews are White and not Black, Black people are not Jewish, this notion that these were separate groups animated my inquiry. And the fact that I had so many interviews led me to this notion of a retrospective ethnography, because it took me a decade, literally, before the mixed method approach gave me the context to make sense of these oral histories, gave me the context to make sense of people's identities relative to the claims that they were making. People were making different kinds of claims about what being Jewish meant to them. So I engaged in fieldwork, I engaged in participant observation, and I do my best in the book to cover the broad territory of types, you might say, of people and their identities.

I have Orthodox Jews who come out of Crown Heights. I've met people going back to William Saunders Crowdy's church (Church of God and saints of Christ), a particular group that has a history that goes back to the turn of the century with deep Christian roots. They make claim to a Hebrew Israelite identity. There are groups that are messianic and have claimed some of this Jewish discourse, claim to be Hebrew Israelites but also have deep connections to Jesus and Christianity. So, there is a wide variety of people who have used these terms to make various claims. What I try to do is sort them out. In fact, what I ended up understanding, is that much of what was taking place was this conversation about boundaries between groups. Groups were making claims about boundaries and about their identities. And some of those claims are being accepted, others rejected by other groups. This allowed me to sort of map out almost what you could call an organizational space, where groups ultimately end up and find a place.

And in fact, the groups of Jews of color who are organizing today, you might argue they are another form of an organizational space that is beginning to take shape, as particular kinds of Jews with certain Jewish identities come together to make claims on the mainstream Jewish community, as Jews of color. But those Jews of color would not include many other so-called that fall outside of the traditional boundaries of the Jewish community. Now those traditional boundaries in rabbinic Judaism have come about in two ways to be included within the community.

One is a ritual conversion into the community, a traditional formal conversion into Reform Judaism or Conservative Judaism or Orthodox Judaism. Or you are born of a Jewish mother who is recognized by one of those movements. In this way that Judaism or being a Jew is not about belief. It's not about a belief system. It's about the way certain rules and boundaries are structured within the community. In the early days, for example, in my research, the first time I heard a Jewish person tell me they didn't really believe in God, I was like, wow, that's confusing. I didn't understand, because isn't religion about faith? I quickly learned, no, no, Judaism is about following the Mosaic law. It is about what you do, not about what you believe, but about your behavior. That essential distinction, I think, confuses many people about how the boundaries within the Jewish world are constituted. Belief is not essential, but behavior is.

So, I engaged in an interdisciplinary approach to data and history, tracing the conversation about Jews back into the early modern Western era. I realized that there was a fascinating parallel conversation taking place that emerges then, that places Jews and Africans in station in a scientific discourse about race difference. And it's that connection that for me allows us to understand why racism and anti-Semitism are so closely tied together amongst white nationalists in the modern era. It has to do with the fact that both Jews and blacks were framed as outsiders in the Western canon. And you might say they are the two groups that are the most, the strongest signifiers of human difference in the modern world. So what I try to show in my book, by tracing the Jewish conversation back to the early modern era, is that Orientalism and Orientalist ideas about difference have a strong modern impact on how we see Jews in the modern world. I trace how Orientalism and Orientalist thought that emerges out of the early modern era, is incorporated into scientific discourse about color and primitiveness. There's a strong overlap between Orientalist discourse about Jews, scientific discourses about Jews, and how Jews, as we entered the modern era, at the turn of the 20th century are, you might say, reframed as white people in a Western and particularly American context.

But meanwhile, in the European context, in the German context, the racial discourse, claiming that Jews were actually racially other, remained quite virulent. And in fact, we see the tension between these two discourses in the modern world. Tension between Jews as racial other, and Jews as one of us, as white people, as framed through a colonial framework. Jews became accepted as white between the end of World War II and the current era, but there's been a certain amnesia that has taken place about how Jews were actually seen in the Western world. I think doing a retrospective ethnography allowed me to use history to illustrate how deeply race was embedded in the discourses of the subjects I interviewed. It helped explain why race became a central framework through which Africans claim their humanity. And I talk about how religion became a vehicle as in a kind of racial discourse, in making claims about membership.

For many black Americans, this discourse about linking to the narrative of the ancient Israelites provided a vehicle through which they could reclaim their humanity within a racial discourse that denied their humanity. This is what placed race and religion, you

might say, into conversation with a wide variety of Jews, including Orthodox Yemenite, one individual whom I interviewed, which sort of brings the case home for me. Ethiopian mother, Yemenite father, lived an Orthodox life. This gentleman had gone through three Orthodox conversions, because every time he changed communities, the communities wanted proof of intimacy. In other words, he had to go through the legitimating process of proving that he was, quote, an Orthodox, a legit Jew. That takes me to really interesting questions about, well, how do we measure Jews of African descent today? How many are there? And there are lots of interesting discourses that are taking place about that.

Depending on how you define who is Jewish, will define how many Jews of color you will find.

If you take a more conservative, religiously conservative, halakhic definition, you'll have fewer Jews of color. But if you adopt a more liberal definition, for instance including Jews of color who have simply, say, cultural identities as Jews, but are not practicing their religion, then your numbers of Jews of color will increase. So how you define who's a Jew has a big determination on how many Jews of color there actually are. If we look at national surveys, the numbers are small but growing consistently. The surveys really begin in the 1990s, the first time that race classifications are actually even used on surveys of Jews in America. Before that, the presumption was that they were all of one race. And that presumption, of course, was that they were all white.

Today, at my own university, just to give you an idea, UC Davis, the most recent survey of our Jewish students showed that 17% self-identified as non-white. And actually, the Jewish community, Hillel (Foundation for Jewish Campus Life) and other administrators were quite surprised that there were so many Jews who said they were non-white. And there's a certain invisibility to them, because sometimes they're not necessarily a part of the Hillel. And it's not always clear when one uses identity as the basis for classification, which people you're actually talking about. So they don't really know who is included in that 17% of the Jewish community. It's a really interesting, fascinating question. The same thing is taking place in surveys of urban areas, particularly New York City or Chicago or the Bay Area, where you see large numbers of blacks and Jews in the same cities. You also see larger numbers of non-white Jews. These are demographic trends that are taking place within the Jewish community. This is something that the Jewish community now, particularly the reformed community, is

beginning to talk about much more extensively. The reformed community, for instance, has a division that's in charge of that, it happened maybe a decade ago, before the DEI(Diversity Equality and Inclusion) craze, they were paying attention to this question of diversity within a Jewish context. And that diversity within a Jewish religious context means mixed marriages, mixed religious marriages, mixed race marriages, mixed culture. There were a lot of dimensions to the notion of Jewish diversity, not just racial diversity that the reformed community in particular has been paying attention to.

So retrospective ethnography was necessary in order to really make sense of these rich interviews that I had. It was possible only through reflection of the context of the different interviews and having the time really to both have the interviews and then reflect back on what was taking place during this time period in the 1990s and early 2000s. Now it seems that I happen to be at ground zero of a changing demographics that was taking place within the Jewish community. I was actually on the ground as those demographics were changing, interviewing some of these “new “Jewish faces that were becoming more visible within the community. And it was only by hindsight I could see that, through contextualizing these stories and then using the historical data to sift through fact and fiction. For instance, I had Caribbean Jews saying, well, you know, I have a grandmother who used to light candles. So I think I'm Jewish. And so I'm going to now practice Judaism. And so you saw these kinds of things.

I will end my story here with a very personal shift in the conversation. After writing this book, I was curious about my own ancestry and decided to do ancestry.com, who came back to report that it believed that my grandfather, who is a rather famous black American (George Edmund Haynes, born in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, the first black to get a PhD at Columbia University, and the founder of the National Urban League) had Jewish ancestry. Well, as far as I knew my family history, George Haynes' father was a black man from Lowndes County, Alabama. But we later found out that George Haynes's father was a Jewish man named Louis Althimer. And that is proven through the genetic link to the Althimer family that I apparently have. I found out that in my own life, I am “14% Central and Eastern European Jewish ancestry”. That was a great surprise to me! But it also gave me great insight into some of the Hebrew Israelites who I encountered, who are laying claim to ancestral connections through slavery, through the Caribbean to say, hey, I have an ancestor back there he is Jewish, and so

I feel Jewish. So I'm going to reclaim this identity. Suddenly, that possibility entered my own life. I found this quite fascinating having chosen to write a book about Jews of African descent, and then finding out that I am possibly quite like some of the people whom I were interviewing. It's fascinating. And it has had an interesting ripple effect in a personal way, in the way people have responded to what that means to them, which I find interesting. For some people, I became a little bit more Jewish simply because of the 14%. Suddenly they have an explanation for why this black guy from Harlem decided to write about Jews of African descent. It's fascinating to me how people then take this information and reinterpret, which is really the story of what the book is about, claim. How claims are really not about truth, they're about claims. And how we see race playing an important role in shaping how those boundaries of community are worked out here in the United States, and how those claims are made, who's legitimate, and who's not, and how race became a central cleavage in shaping those outcomes.

Nonna Mayer

Thank you very much Bruce for your presentation. It's a fascinating story, a fascinating book and I really advise those interested by this issue to read it. I like the idea of a historical retrospective ethnography. I like the way you mix methods-internet, interviews, archives. I like the way you mix theoretical frames, combining racial studies, religious studies, sociology, urban sociology. The result is really interesting, and very moving because of your own history, you are at the same time inside and outside.

Now I would like to ask a few questions. The first one would be, is it still currently used, today, the expression « Black Jew »? Isn't it perceived as offensive? If you are Black, in the US, don't you prefer to be called African American?

Bruce Haynes

That's a tricky question. Terms like this, I think you have to call people what they want to be called, I think that is the question. Not everybody is comfortable with being called Black. Some Blacks prefer African American. For instance, in America, some African immigrants prefer to refer to their national identities as opposed to Black as their first identity. But Black, you see, for me, Black is the term that most African Americans

prefer. It's almost like I want to say Black is a political term. When one says one is Black, one is signifying a connection to some political discourse in some way. Is it offensive? The challenge for me is that race is always reification of race. For me, in the title of my book, « Jews of African Descent in America », I was very purposeful to say; this is not a book about Black Jews. Because the book, I believe, attempts to explain and deconstruct how race takes shape. In order to do that, I can't use race as the term.

For me, that was one of the challenges of writing the book, a challenge of language. I spent a lot of time thinking how not to reify race when you talked about Africans, which is something that's done regularly. For example, I was referring to something I was recently writing about Jewish immigrants coming from Africa, and people said, well, don't you mean North Africa? And I thought, well, why should I say « North » Africa? Because that's how we racialize Africa, don't you understand? We've racialized Africa through this geographic conversation. When we say North Africans, we're not talking about the indigenous Africans who are dark people. So there's an implicit conversation there. When we talk about the sub-Saharan Africans, we're not talking about the lighter Africans, are we? So it's an implicitly racial discourse. I do talk about that a bit in my book, particularly when it comes to talking about sub-Saharan Africa, because in a sense, that's where the real Black people live.

Nonna Mayer

Now I have questions about symbolic boundaries. The first one would be, many things have changed since you've written your book. How would you see the situation today about the perceptions of Black in general, and Jews, in the US? After the movement Black Lives Matter, after what has been going on in Israel since the Second Intifada, how would you see the evolution of the perceptions of Black and Jews in America? In the same line has it changed the way Blacks see Jews and Jews see Blacks in general? Then I'm interested in how Black Jews see non-Black Jews. And vice-versa. How has that changed? And how about Jews? Black Jews, how do they see the non-Black Jews and vice versa? How are the relations between all these different, complex, dual, identities? Inside the different tribes of Black Jews that you have described, those who believe the real Jews would be the Hebrews and those for whom they would be African or be Ethiopian, are there any connections between all these different groups

of Jews? You spoke of one umbrella organization, how far does it extend? Are there not rivalries between them?

Last, what about post-colonial studies? How do they receive your book?

Bruce Haynes

Okay, let me start with the last. Post-colonial studies. My book has been widely reviewed, and I'm very happy to say it's been very positively reviewed, but it's been selectively reviewed, I guess I would say. Even though I was reviewed within mainstream sociology, for instance, I've got a great review in contemporary sociology, I'm not sure how much my book has influenced the discourse in mainstream that says Jews are white people, because they wouldn't be able to draw that conclusion so easily after reading my book. One would have to problematize whiteness for Jews in America and would not be able to say they're just like everybody else. Even if you talk about white privilege, however much you wanted to, you still couldn't say they're just like everybody else. I think that it's not very well accepted in some ways in post-colonial studies.

Jewish studies on the contrary were very receptive. The irony for me is I actually believe that I would have been much more centered to talking about race within a central race conversation and Jewish studies was not the place I thought I would be recognized by. In some ways, maybe it's precisely because I was willing to raise questions about Jewish whiteness in a deep historical way that it resonated with contemporary dilemmas that Jews face. Maybe it's for that reason that within the Jewish context, the book has gotten way more traction, to my pleasant surprise actually. Whereas less in historically Black colleges, for example, I'm sad to say I have not been invited to one talk at a historically Black college. I think my book is directly going to deconstruct race at its heart, but that's not necessarily how the book is seen, the Jewish part of my book overshadows the race deconstruction of my book, let's put it that way.

Maybe that says something in and of itself in terms of how we think about Jews, people see the book as a book about Jews, they don't see the book as a book about race. But I wrote it specifically, explicitly to use Jews as a case to explore the deconstruction of

race, like how did race get constructed. If you look at my first book on the suburbs, I look at how segregation shapes the production of race in the suburbs, and I talk about a Black middle-class suburban community and why do race and class become central to the identities of the people in that community. So, in many ways, my book on Jews is an extension of that exploration into the social construction of race and why do we think race is so natural. Really, that was my question. Why do we think Blacks Jews are so naturally not a group? Like there seemed to be this, you know, ready-made cultural script that I was deconstructing to say, well, why can't there be Blacks Jews? Jews came to be a group in Egypt. Why would there not be Jews in Africa? Isn't that kind of silly? But in some ways, the historical narrative of how we constructed the Jewish narrative, Jews left and went to Europe and never did Jews flow through Africa. Is that really reasonable to think when Jewish traders were trading through the Arab world for centuries? What I've done is a kind of re-evaluation of some of the historiography. And in fact, I found myself in great dialogue, not with sociologists, but with historians who often made claims with very little data.

For instance, scholars who studied Black Jews in the past said, no, all those Black Jews, they just made it up. None of them had any connections to Jews. So then I started exploring claims of Hebrew-Israelites who said, oh no, I have ancestors. And then if you go back in this historical record, you start saying, well, you know, maybe these claims are possible. Maybe there is a connection here, that's not quite « these are just crazy Black people who said they wanted to be Jews one day », which when you look at the literature before my book was pretty much what the conversation said, there were no Bonafide Black Jews in America, they made it up. And then I entered into the conversation. Saying, well, maybe it's more complicated, a lot more complicated.

You have all these different boundaries and gradations and claim making. Like Lewis Gordon, for example, a famous Black philosopher who has Jewish ancestry, he has made claim to his Jewish ancestry, married a Jewish woman and has a Jewish child. And he writes about this very explicitly. So, the notions that people are just one thing really kind of falls apart profoundly with this research.

What we find is that people are complicated and the way they make claims to group boundaries can be very complicated, particularly in the modern world.

Nonna Mayer

There are two things I'd like to ask you precisely.

In France and in Europe, often Black Jews have the feeling that they're really not accepted by Jewish communities, isn't there the same rejection in the U.S.? And which communities, the liberal ones, the orthodox one, who is the most open?

Bruce Haynes

There's a mix, I would say.

I think these are all sort of too complicated questions without having really sound empirical data to talk about. I mean, there are different trends going on. So, for example, one of the things in my research that I found interesting was that more orthodox Jews, more ritually leaning Jews, tended to focus on the boundaries of Judaism much more than on their white identity. Whereas liberal Jews, more secular Jews tended to have that identity as white as more of a grounding for their identity. But those are sort of, you know, casual observations, the kinds of questions you're asking about group related dynamics. One of the challenges I think is talking too much about people through their group categories. I can't say, for instance well, look, Black Jews, they all responded this way to October 7th. No, but I would say that many Jews of African descent and Jews of color find themselves in awkward positions at times, trying to negotiate conversations about Palestinians and color in America while they negotiate questions of Jewishness and whiteness in America. And so this creates some interesting contradictions for people. Sometimes, for instance, they feel they're getting it from both sides. I've heard Black Jews saying, you know, I'm still getting racism, but now I'm getting anti-Semitism because, you know, Israel's at war. And so I'm getting it on that side too. So, they often feel a double squeeze. That double squeeze is not necessarily coming internally to the community, but I would also say that there are real issues of both color, culture, and race, that create ongoing negotiations within the American Jewish community.

Nonna Mayer

And I would have the symmetric question. What about, for instance, Black Muslims,

the difficult relations between Black Jews and Black Muslims?

Bruce Haynes

You know, it's funny. The first person to ask about that is an interesting rabbi by the name of Kapers Feneh, rabbi in Chicago. He is an « Israelite » rabbi, chief rabbi for the Ethiopian Hebrew congregation in New York City. A rather famous group there, a particular group of Hebrew Israelites that are very orthodox in their practice. He is a member of that group, but he also has, his whole family converted to conservative Judaism, because he wants normative recognition within mainstream Jewish circles. So, you have boundaries like that. And he's had a lot of conversations with Farrakhan because he's in Chicago. But I don't think there's any good and clear way that I could describe some generic relationship across these camps. I think it's sort of trying to say, well, you know, what's the relationship between Christians and Jews in America? It depends on which Christians and Jews you're going to talk to at this moment. In which church, in which neighborhood. So to paint a kind of generic picture like that, I think is hard to do.

The bigger tension, I would say, if there's a tension, is between orthodox Jews, orthodox black Jews who grew up in very traditional orthodox context, say in Crown Heights or other parts of very orthodox communities. People confuse them with Hebrew Israelites of all different stripes, some of whom wind up in sensational newspaper stories. And they think, oh, they're all black Jews. So if there's a group that wants to be singled out, it is the Halakhic Jews, however you define them, reform, conservative, who are confused with these other people who they feel are not real Jews. So there definitely is a tension there, I think. And there have been a few orthodox who've made that very clear, like, don't confuse me with these other people here.

The other tension, I think, is really about the Jews of color as they come to organize as Jews of color and get mainstream Jewish support from the Federation for groups like the Jews of color initiative, there's tension over who's a Jew of color. For instance, if I'm a Latin Jew, I've been a Latin Jew my whole life, do I need to say I'm a Jew of color now because we have this new term Jew of color? You see the problem? What if I'm a Sephardic Jew? Am I a Jew of color? I don't think I'm white, but does that mean

I'm a Jew of color? So there's all these questions, who's a Jew of color? Who should be counted? Is it about your identity? Is it about the person who's classifying you? How to actually get a handle on the numbers of non-white Jews is a dilemma that's yet to be worked out. And it's a new dilemma that I think the community is just beginning to grapple with as the numbers change. We have more people, we have to count them. Who gets counted? How should we count them? Who wants to be counted? Who doesn't want to be counted? You have these endless sort of demographic issues about how to count people. Is it identity or is it classification? I say you're a Jew of color. Do you say you're a Jew of color? The difference between an identity versus a classification is a real tense one, and it raises important challenges as the community tries to map its own changes taking place, for communal services or whatever.

Questions

A participant (postdoc, Sherbrooke University, Canada)

Thank you very much, Bruce, for your presentation. And thank you also, Nonna, for stealing my question about orthodox Jews, because as you said, I've worked on orthodox Jews in France a little bit also, in Montreal, a couple of months, but also in France. So no wonder I'm kind of obsessed by this topic. I have the same question as Nonna. During my fieldwork in France, I was struck by sometimes openly racist and disparaging comments about Black people or Black people, not African American, black people in France. Amongst the orthodox communities. I was even in some Haredim communities, who try keeping the surrounding society at bay. And sometimes it came out when it was totally unsolicited, I didn't have specific questions about Black Jews, or the Falasha, or even the Twelfth Tribes. It came out of the blue, highly racist comments. Not many times. But still, the fact that it came uncalled for, was pretty striking to me.

Bruce Haynes

Was this towards Black Jews or towards Blacks in general?

A participant (postdoc, Sherbrooke University, Canada)

Towards Blacks in general. Black Jews, as if they were not part even of a Jewish narrative, if you like, as if they were not part in the Jewish history. And this is pretty striking because, as you said, the way I understood, that orthodox Jews tend to be more rigid on the Jewish boundaries, not in terms of Black or white identity.

Bruce Haynes

Well, it would be interesting for me to know how much the context of France and who is Black in France shapes their understanding of discussing who is Black. Like in the American context, you know, they're not thinking of North Africans when Americans say Black people. They're thinking of a particular kind of Black person. I wonder how much that cultural context shapes who they think is Black. That may be a good option to better understand this kind of comments.

A participant (postdoc, Sherbrooke University, Canada)

But in that case, it was a very secluded community, trying to keep the surrounding society at bay. They had very few contacts with the surrounding society, in terms of media, for example. They only interact with the outgroup when they have to go to the pharmacy, for example. And I remember specifically Jewish women making those racist comments, linking Black, I don't even say identity, but at least Black people to Noah's episodes in the Bible, that being Black was kind of a punishment, a sanction imposed on Black people.

Bruce Haynes

When I t went to France the first time, the thing that hit me..., So I'm going to France with my Jewish wife and my Jewish in-laws. And we're going to the Jewish quarter, we're going around.

The thing that hit me is how different the Jewish community in France was from the Jewish American community. The openness. I grew up in New York. New York is the most Jewish place outside of Tel Aviv that you can find. You'll see Jews with big stars

of David on their chests. You'll see a public display of identity. But that's New York. I used to have my Negro League baseball shirts. In New York, your race, your ethnic identity is very public. The American Jewish community specifically in New York is very diverse, but you are free to express your Jewishness openly. And when I was in France, the way in which Jewish identities were cloistered and protected and hidden was so transparent to me, and maybe not as transparent to a native French speaker. For instance, my wife and I would meet people and they would say something like, Oh, yes, we have a Jewish ancestor somewhere back, but we don't talk about them. That's so unheard of in America.

Or the notion that we would go around the corner and into a little archway and then inside this tremendous synagogue inside. But outside, you couldn't tell anything was happening, this is so weird. It's like hidden. It gave me a whole different understanding of the Jewish mentality in Europe, not like America.

Nonna Mayer

I wouldn't say Europe. France is one thing. But this notion that Jews are hidden, they're hiding, I should bring you to Sarcelles where it definitely is not the case. You'd see that there are different ways to live your Judaism.

A participant (PHD student Sciences Po/Oxford)

My first question is, you talked about a shift in perception once you discovered that you had 14 percent Jewish origin. And so instead of others justifying your role as a researcher and saying that it made sense, did you also experience the opposite reaction, meaning researchers delegitimizing your project or arguing that you don't have enough critical distance from your work now that you actually belong to this group, according to some people?

Bruce Haynes

No.

A participant (PHD student Sciences Po/Oxford)

It's interesting. Maybe because as a black scholar who have written about what people perceive as a different group successfully, maybe that makes it harder to undermine.

Bruce Haynes

I'm not sure.

A participant (PHD student Sciences Po/Oxford)

I have another question. When you talked about your fieldwork, could you clarify, did you observe the perspectives and reception of Jews, of Jews and black participants toward your research, to see whether they belong? Also, did you conduct fieldwork of black Jewish interviewees in non-black and non-Jewish spaces? let's say Latinos and Asians, how do they perceive them?

Bruce Haynes

No, I mean, I didn't have that kind of control over the places I was observing. I was able to observe services, holiday practices, weddings. There was a huge learning curve, for example, to learn about Judaism. What's the distinction between Orthodox Judaism as opposed to other branches of Judaism?

A participant (CEE, Sciences Po)

Thank you very much, I really appreciated your talk. This is not my area of expertise, so I hope the question that I have doesn't come across as naive, but I was wondering. You mentioned a few instances or examples about the ways in which black Jews might be specific. But I was also wondering about the extent to which you see perhaps parallels to other forms of hyphenated identities and to the extent to which perhaps just this, you know, once you have the phenomenon of hyphenated identities, that's already perhaps a sign that there is a an ongoing process of trying to sort of approach one community or become part of one community.

Bruce Haynes

I think that's a great question. Last year I had the opportunity to go to Ireland and I met some scholars who are studying the Afro-Irish in Ireland and I thought about how, particularly for the descendants of African colonialism, this sets up this unique set of conditions of Africans in these former colonial states. And that's where we're getting these hyphenated identities. I do think that what I'm capturing is a larger phenomenon that is reflective of massive movements of population. The last hundred years, the numbers of people who have relocated into new parts of the world, who now have to reinvent their identities, is amazing. I think this is definitely a quintessential, a modern phenomenon. And we're seeing a kind of unique kind of hyphenating, the globalization of a sort of Afro or Black identity. I do think that's kind of a global phenomenon in a way that didn't exist 30 years ago. And so my Black Jews here might in a sense identify with the Afro-Irish over their African diasporic kind of connection. I do think this is something that's taking place in more than one place. Definitely. What about you? How do you see this phenomenon, Sebastian?

A participant (CEE, Sciences Po)

Like I said, I'm not being an expert in it, but well, it just struck me that there might be quite a few parallels. For example, the extent to which, as you said, people from countries where their ancestors didn't traditionally live, try to become part of that new country. And it seems like hyphenated identities are sort of a part of that. I'm curious to know if there is more scope to theorize about the conditions under which these identities persist, for example, or change into new identities.

Bruce Haynes

No, I think we're watching it unfold, there are an increasing number of studies. You know, just a couple of years before my book on Jews of African descent came out, there was a book about Jews of Asian descent that came out. And so I think that this is somewhat a new phenomenon. I guess how I started thinking about it literally was the creation of a new social identity, that society opens up the space for, for instance, multiracial claims, and that now in that space, new identities can now move into that

space and make those claims. I really thought of my book as capturing the emerging of a new social identity of Black Jews in America. That 30 years ago, you'd say maybe, you know, prior to Julius Lester's love song book in 1988, there may not really have been a clear Black Jewish identity, but after his book, there definitely was one. And so there are these moments where it's like, you know, the way Tiger Woods solidified multiracial identity, like there's almost these moments where people go, ha, now we can do this now, even though it might have been going on before. So these are fascinating phenomenon.

I think it's the modern world, to me, I think of these people as the quintessential modern people. Modernity uproots people and forces us to come to terms with now who we are. When we live and die in the same place, we don't have to wonder who we are. And so that to me it is a kind of reflection of modernity in a sort of profound way.

Nonna Mayer

It reminds of a French sociologist, Yves Lambert, a sociologist of religions. What he said about the transformation of religions applies to your Black Jews. He saw an ongoing process, especially among the younger generations, of « tinkering », tinkering their religious beliefs³. They took a bit of Catholicism in and a bit of Buddhism and a bit of Judaism to make the ideal mix that they found fit for their own identity. I have that feeling, listening and reading some of the interviews you made. I feel that's kind of what we have always done. But maybe it's been speeding up a little bit. Religious institutions were more solid before.

Bruce Haynes

Right. And then seemingly more permanent identities, right? They seemed to be permanent. Now they flip within a generation. I'm not who my parents are. I'm somebody else now. And so I think of Afro-Americans as sort of the quintessential modern people who had to reinvent themselves as we entered the 20th century. Who

³ Yves Lambert & Guy Michelat (eds.), *Crépuscule des religions chez les jeunes ? Jeunes et religion en France*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1992.

are we? Are we the past? Who will we become? And so we had to make a choice about where does, how do we fit in? How American are we? Just like, you know, Blacks from the Francophone world in France now are trying to, I think, do the same thing, try to fit in. How do I be me and still become part of this larger thing?

A participant (PHD student Sciences Po/Oxford)

I was just wondering, you say Black Jews in America, which is the title of this seminar. But as a qualitative researcher myself, we're more concerned with depth rather than breadth to avoid generalizations. And we can think about, let's say, Katherine Cramer, who only looks at rural Wisconsin to study the politics of resentment⁴. So I was wondering if you had enough variation between, let's say, red and blue states or city, suburban or rural communities? I just don't understand, why not focus on two places, why do you instead use this umbrella term of America?

Bruce Haynes

Well, the nature of the project was challenging, it was really at the beginning, you know, finding the needle in a haystack. So getting my first sample was challenging, and that took me all over the country. I have some interviews in L.A., some in Chicago, some in New York, some in Connecticut. It sort of moved me around to where the people were because it was a snowball sample. The nature of what I was doing, the nature of the project on the internet, the way people were interconnecting, kind of led me to go for a more global approach, really, because unless I wanted to do this project for 40 years, that was the only way to ever get it done. I wanted to understand what was at the heart of these identities. I wasn't aiming to understand what was happening in a particular place in time. I wanted to understand why people said that you could not be a Black and Jewish person in American society.

So it was a very broad question about race, as opposed to the sort of specific ethnographic question. Where the ethnography comes in, I think, for me, is the rich

⁴ Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics Of Resentment: Rural Consciousness In Wisconsin And The Rise Of Scott Walker*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2016.

detail about their identity I'm able to get through their stories. And then trying to connect those stories up to a larger sort of theoretical frame to make sense of them. That was the challenge. I had the stories for 10 years before I could make sense of what they were telling me.

But that's a good point. I mean, I think the next stage is precisely much more micro studies. What is going on with Jews of color in particular places? How is it different in Montana if you're one of 10 people, versus being in L.A. where you're one of 50 families? Of course, clearly, there are going to be vast differences. We're just getting to a point where there are Jews of color being born into a context where the only Jews they know are other Jews of color. So that in and of itself is a kind of emerging phenomenon. Plenty of things to detail. I hope my research just gets the ball rolling. I don't claim to be the definitive statement on Black Jews, so much as to introduce, I think, an important topic and use them as a vehicle to deconstruct the way race gets shaped in society. The main goal was to deconstruct race, not to understand Black Jews.

Nonna Mayer

I have a question about movies. I saw that there are a lot of movies coming out about Black Jews in the States, some of them very controversial (*You People*⁵), but I saw at least eight others listed.

Bruce Haynes

About Black Jews or Jews and Blacks relations or both?

Nonna Mayer

Both.

⁵ 2023, by Jonah Hill and Kenya Barris.

Bruce Haynes

You have Marc Dollinger's book that recently came out about Jews and Black power⁶. That certainly put a little conversation into it. I think that these are all topics that have a lot of traction right now because of the political times, people wondering what the relationship between Blacks and Jews is, people seeing the rise in anti-Semitism and racism, and sort of revisiting some of these questions. But I think that there's a lot of different relations across the community depending on which generation of Blacks and Jews one looks at. There's a lot more interaction, say, between Blacks and Jews who are in their 50s to their 70s than there are between Blacks and Jews who are in their 20s and 30s. Some of that is demographically related and some of that's historically related, but it's very hard to paint a broad picture about relationships across these groups.

A participant (postdoc, Sherbrooke University, Canada)

Yes, and I reckon it's a question which is hard to answer because, as you said, it's hard to paint a broad picture. But still, I can't help it because my question is about the political behavior of Black or African-American Jews. I know it's well above and beyond your research and I understand the lack of solid data, but perhaps based on your casual observation, you may have some insights about the political, electoral, voting behavior of those people, because we know from literature that still in the US, Jewish voters tend to predominantly favor the Democrats and alternatively that Black people, Black voters, tend to predominantly vote for the Democrats. So would you see a kind of combined effect, if you like?

Bruce Haynes

Well, there's a bit of bifurcation of the Jewish-American community now, in part because of the war, right? And there's a kind of conservative, more orthodox wing that tends to be very supportive of Republican Party stuff. Then there's a larger, more

⁶ Marc Dollinger, *Black Power, Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s*, Dartmouth College Press, 2018.

traditionally liberal Jewish community that is definitely, heavily, Democrat. I would say overall Black Jews fall into the latter category. I don't think I've met a single Black Jewish supporter of Trump, but I have met other orthodox Jewish supporters of Trump. So there is a kind of AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) split with a more liberal, J Street Jewish community.

A participant (postdoc, Sherbrooke University, Canada)

That would be fascinating, wouldn't it be, to specifically study Republican-leaning Black Jews, if you like, to see how they set the boundaries between their Black or African-American identity and their political identity, when you have on the one hand candidates making disparaging comments about Black people, Black identity, et cetera, but at the same time giving you what you want to listen to in terms of geopolitics, for example.

Bruce Haynes

Oh, I think that would be a fascinating subgroup, but even a harder one, you know, more challenge to find a sample of them. I have a couple of students who recently, some years ago, wrote about Black Republicans, but we didn't find any Jews in their sample. So they may be hard to find but it's not impossible. I think you're right. When you can isolate a group like that, that's when you can ask these kinds of more interesting probing questions.

Nonna Mayer

A magnifying glass, it would be a nice magnifying glass.

Bruce Haynes

Exactly, exactly. How will they navigate? And it would be interesting, I would imagine some of their navigation would be very personal because they'd be immersed within networks of other Orthodox Jews. So then it raises all sorts of other questions. It would be interesting. If they're confronted to integration issues, for example, denying, or

downplaying their Black identities would be a way to foster their acceptance, to gain greater acceptance from the Republican comrades, for example, to be up to a point as racist as some Republican voters are, if you like. Well, I think when I did my interviews, one of the things I was most taken when I interviewed some Orthodox who were very much immersed in the Ashkenazi community was how race came up. Often it didn't come up in an overt way. One of my favorite interviews was with a gentleman, in Crown Heights, who worked in the Orthodox community out of his home. In the basement of his home, he has two women secretaries, it's a big space, he has two desks, both Ashkenazi women working for him, and I'm interviewing him over at his desk. And when he wants to talk to me about race, he leans in close to tell me about that race still mattered. And I was shocked because discussing race was the last thing I was expecting from this Orthodox guy. And he brings up the notion that, you know, what did he tell me, that Adam and Eve were really Black. It was actually his comment that really got me wondering about what is going on here with this race thing. Because he sounded so much like some of the Hebrew Israelites I had spoken to, where race mattered to their conversation. In fact, I think that was maybe a pivotal interview for me, that really pushed me to go, showing there was something to this thing, this race thing.

Why is this guy who is so Jewish, who could not be more Jewish, and lived his whole life in an Orthodox Jewish world, and does not have many interactions with Afro-Americans like myself, now when he has a chance to talk about it, sort of says, hey, come in closer, let's talk about this race thing. I was fascinated by it. Really, it shaped how I was thinking about trying to bring this race conversation across all these different people. I knew there was something there, and I just had to figure out what the heck it was. But there was something to this race thing that everybody, no matter how religious, no matter what stripe, whether they're coming from the ghetto, they're foreign born, they're born in Ethiopia, it didn't matter, they're still talking to me about race. That was the conundrum.

A participant (postdoc, Sherbrooke University, Canada)

And why?

Bruce Haynes

Great question. Because race is at the center of how we've organized society. So Jews are navigating the color line, just like black people. That's the simple answer. Jews got to cross the color line, black people didn't. That's the easy answer.

A participant (postdoc, Sherbrooke University, Canada)

But if this guy, like the gentleman you're talking about, lived in a totally Orthodox Jewish world, through which connection, if you like, would those racial, social codes have been transmitted to him? From where would he get a feeling of the way the surrounding society was structured along racial lines ?

Bruce Haynes

Part of it was because no one believed he was a real Jew. Being Jewish was defined by whiteness. And when he showed up with his black face, they said, how are you Jewish? And he said, I'm real. And then they said, prove it. And he had to go through another test. So he went through three ritual conversions. And race being at the center of a problem for this completely Orthodox man, I thought, wow, so even in this Orthodox world, you're dealing with racism? And the fact that he wanted to tell me about it was also interesting, because it was almost like if he finally had someone he could talk to about this little piece of his identity that, in general, he kept buried. And suddenly, it was almost the secretiveness by which he kind of said, oh, I don't want the women to hear, but let's talk about, you know. Perhaps because he had a feeling that it was kind of illegitimate to raise the topic of race. He felt race was stealing his legitimacy as a Jew. It challenged his race, said he wasn't Jewish, and it bothered him. My mother's Jewish, my father's Jewish, I've lived my whole life in an Orthodox world. I couldn't be more Jewish. How come just because of this, now you think I'm not Jewish? It irritated him, and it also, how would I put it? He racialized even his biblical interpretations, just like the Hebrew Israelites did. And that was the part that made me think this was really deep here. He lives in a non-racial existence, for the most part, in Orthodox New York, and yet somehow race was in his world, too. So it led me to this sort of deeper questions about, you know, everybody was navigating race. I think that

was the thing. It looks like only the Black people are navigating race, but in fact, the white Jews are navigating race just as much. That's what my book shows. Whiteness has to be earned, claimed, accepted. It's not taken for granted.

And look at Asians who are way whiter than some white Europeans, it's not about color, obviously, it's about something else that we don't talk about. What race is about, there's nothing to do with color. Or should I say color is only a signifier of race difference. It's not the defining characteristic of race difference. In fact, we can make white people Black and white Black people white. It's all about classification.

That's why Homer Plessy, who was very white, if he walked into a room today, people would think he was a white person, but he got classified as Negro. Thus, he gets kicked off the train, enforcing segregation for Jim Crow segregation in America. And that just goes to show that color is just a signifier of difference. It's not the determining factor of difference. Race is about classification, not color. That's the big misunderstanding about what race is. Race is about classification and difference, not about color.

Nonna Mayer

And yet, color matters. If you take a society like the French West Indies, les Antilles, it's a signifier, there's a hierarchy according to the degree of whiteness or Blackness of your skin?

Bruce Haynes

But you can be really white and still be Black. And the only way that's possible is because color is not a determining factor of your race classification. It's an indicator. For example, I always say, for instance, a very dark Indian from South India, way darker than me, everybody in America knows he is not Black. That's the distinction. Race is classification, not color.

Just like an Asian person comes into a room, you put them next to a European person, their skin may be actually whiter, but we don't say that Asian person is white, do we? Again, it is not about color. It's about classification. It always has been. It's about what

qualifies you for the classification, and then that's where societal rules kick in. So, in Brazil, I'm not quite Black. I'm a mixed-race person in Brazil.

A participant (TAPRI/Tampere University)

Thank you for a very interesting presentation and discussion. I would like to ask about how you see the Black-Jewish relation in the U.S. in the landscape of the conflict between Israeli and Palestinians.

Bruce Haynes

Well, you know, it's interesting. Number of Black Jews said they felt caught in the middle because many of them are supportive of Israel. And many Americans think, well, the conflict Palestine/Israel is a Black-white conflict. It's a color conflict. Therefore, Black people should be supporting the Palestinians who are also Black people. But for many Black Jews, color is not a defining characteristic for them. It's about their Jewishness. They could not care less that the Palestinians are dark people. That's not relevant to how they see the world.

So, when I say Black Jews, I'm talking about people who are in the mainstream of Jewish movements, I think many of them are like their Ashkenazi counterparts, concerned about the state of Israel and worried about rising anti-Semitism. But they're also facing rising racism on top of it, too. So, in some ways, they feel a double squeeze right now.

A participant (PHD student Sciences Po/Oxford)

My question isn't as relevant anymore, but it was from a previous point, I was just wondering, because you did mention that a lot of Jews saw themselves as white, I wonder if it was mostly the case in places with a predominantly Ashkenazi community?

Bruce Haynes

Oh, we're totally talking Ashkenazi. When I say white, you can tell it completely. I mean,

in fact, the way in which Jews in America were defined as, quote, « white » people was completely an Ashkenazi presumption and a European cultural presumption. So, like, Jewish food is bagels and lox in America, as opposed to Sephardic cuisine.

A participant (PHD student Sciences Po/Oxford)

And by the same token, if you were to extend your research today, I wonder, given that a lot of anti-Israel people would use the argument about it to, you know, Jewish people or Israelis completely coming from Eastern Europe, these communities nowadays, do they use the Black Jewish experience as sort of token Jews, to show that actually there is diversity within the Jewish community, it's not just European colonialism?

Bruce Haynes

I think it's way more than token Jews. If you look at Israel today, the majority of the Israeli population are non-Ashkenazi, non-European descent Jews, meaning they come from former Arab lands, the Maghreb and North Africa. So the notion that Jews are white is completely a fiction and a political fiction.

A participant (PHD student Sciences Po/Oxford)

I understand. I was just in Israel during the war, but I was wondering, to what extent people can also use this politically?

Bruce Haynes

That's a good point. When Netanyahu came to the UN, actually, it might have been to Congress, and I wasn't particularly unfavorable of his speech, but I will say this, he was very strategic in his use of Israeli citizens who were fighting the war. And it was one of the first times I saw Israel present a sort of non-white image of itself. So he showed all of these non-Ashkenazi Israelis who were fighting in the war. So I would go so far to say Israel's had a terrible public relations framework by constantly showing Israel as a place of blue-eyed, blonde-haired Israelis, as opposed to showing a more diverse Israel. The dominant public image, is a very Europeanized narrative of Jewish

ancestry. But if, actually, you look on a global scale, the way Jews moved throughout the world over the past thousand years, it's far more complicated than that.

So there's a kind of whitening of the narrative of Jews, and you could argue that American Jews were part of telling that historiography that centered Jewish narrative on a European narrative at the expense of, say, a Sephardic or an Iraqi or alternative narratives of Jewish history. Our notion of Jewish history is very Euro-centered, right, on Holocaust and Yiddish type. That's the cornerstones of how we think of Jewish culture writ large. But Jewish culture is far more complicated than that.

I think one of the challenges is what we refer to as the post-colonial studies framework, which essentially frames Israel as a colonial state of European descendants. And that's partly true, but it's very reductionist. And I think it's in these very simplistic narratives that we end up getting stuck and unable to have more nuanced conversations about how complicated things really are. Israel is a pretty multiracial society on a number of levels, including with its Arab-Israeli population. But that's not generally the way the image is presented in the globe.

Nonna Mayer

The last law that tries to make of Israel a Jewish, purely, exclusively Jewish state (2018, «Israel, the nation-state of the Jewish people) doesn't exactly go in that direction ?

Bruce Haynes

Well, and some of those that really wanted a Jewish state are also Sephardic. There's no contradiction between white and Sephardic. But you may have to make a distinction about color here. I think that's really important. There's color, there's colorocracy, there's race, there's racism. Within the Jewish world, there certainly has been a history of colorocracy, right? But I think it's a mistake to say that's the same as racism. This is why we need the term Orientalism to explain how we think about color and modernity.

A participant

I do think that can also be used against white Jews and especially Israelis, Ashkenazi and Sephardis living in Israel. Because, I mean, a lot of people are aware that there are Jewish minorities, Kaifeng Jews, or black Jews. But a lot of people would say that when this diversity narrative of how diverse the Jewish diaspora and Israel are, some people would rebut and say, yes, but if you look at the history of Ethiopian Jews and the treatment of Ethiopian Jews in Israel...

Bruce Haynes

Just like to say the United States is diverse is not to say it doesn't have racism. The same is true for Israel. To say Israel is diverse is not to say Israel does not have a racial issue. And I write about that in terms of how the Ethiopians became symbolic of representation of black Jews globally. Part of that had to do with the problematic way in which they're incorporated into Israeli society, which certainly has over layers of racism. And so, Ethiopians who are now part of the Israeli state will talk about it. In fact, some of their conversations have become more like American conversations in that they've centered on race. But what's very different about them is they still want to see their prime identity as Israeli and Jewish. And so, they're struggling with how to bring those things together.