The Rise of Black Ethnics: The Ethnic Turn in African American Religions, 1916–1945

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Introduction

Just a few years ahead of the First World War, Chicago was well positioned to deliver on America's promise to immigrants as the land of opportunity. The city, like other major urban centers such as New York City and Philadelphia, enjoyed an international reputation as a major artery of American capitalism, which spelled financial opportunity for millions. So it was no surprise that immigrants from distant lands made Chicago their American destination, where they would likely eke out a living in one of the many industrial factories. Even for native-born Americans, particularly those from the South, the siren call of the big city was increasingly irresistible; the new faces in Chicago were domestic as well as foreign. African Americans, between 1900 and 1920, would triple their numbers to more than 90,000 in that city's Southside; Bronzeville, as the area was called, became the "Harlem" of Chicago, accounting for more than 80 percent of the city's African American population.[1]

It was during this time that David Ben Itzchok arrived in Chicago.[2] Like many other Jews of Chicago's ghettos, he spoke Hebrew and chanted psalms in worship. But Ben Itzchok attracted far more attention in the city than did most individuals for one particular reason: Ben Itzchok was black. When asked about his origins, he claimed to hail from Ethiopia, explaining that he was a member of the Falasha community of Jews. A local newspaper described him as "coal black," a "Jew in spirit" with "the flesh of an African."[3] Most of the European Jews of Chicago refused to recognize him as a "real" Jew, however, precisely because he was black. When the *Chicago Daily Tribune* ran its story on Ben Itzchok during the summer of 1913, the paper was careful to cite the *Encyclopedia of Judaism* and other widely accepted Jewish authorities to explain to readers that Jews of many colors and ethnicities lived throughout the world, suggesting

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that Ben Itzchok should be seen as merely one of the many varieties of Jews who had found their way to the diverse metropolis of Chicago. Ben Itzchok eventually confessed that his claim of Ethiopian origins was fabricated to authenticate an invented Jewish identity; his legal name was Frederick Douglass Berger, and he had been born right here in America. Inspired through his encounters with numerous immigrants, Berger had cultivated fluency in numerous languages, including Hebrew. His brief moment in the public spotlight, nevertheless, disturbed the racist assumptions about blackness and religious identity.[4]

This was not the first time that Americans would be pressed to ponder the implications of black Jewish identity. White Christian missionaries, since the 1860s, had sought aggressively to replace Judaism with Christianity by mass conversion of the Falasha Jews (or Beta Israel, more appropriately) of Ethiopia; in the twentieth century, European Jews would try to convert them to Western Judaism. Largely as a result of these missionary efforts, people throughout Europe and America learned of the presence of Africa's black Jews.[5] Almost two decades before David Ben Itzchok arrived in Chicago, the *New York Times* ran an article on Ethiopian Jews. The *Times* author was convinced that these Ethiopian Jews, though *in* Africa, were not *of* Africa. As Semites, he opined, they were surely a separate race, certainly not black; their origins must surely lie outside of Africa. Even at this point, black identity was being imagined by whites in sharp distinction from culturally and historically portentous identity like Jewishness.[6]

A growing number of blacks themselves, however, promoted a vastly different agenda. As the twentieth century wore on, religion in the northern cities—and even the rural South, though less frequently—would be marked by black claims to Jewish and even Muslim identity. During the years of the two world wars, in fact, a number of African Americans began to form new religious communities by advancing some surprising claims. They identified themselves as heirs to a unique, rich heritage comprising their own religion, customs, rituals, even language. This involved rejecting the racial category of "Negro" by asserting that this so-called identity was a misleading misnomer because it denied their rightful claim to a rich legacy of pre-American origins and ancestry. They believed "Negro" identity delimited their existence within the bounds of skin color, flattening them into a dark body of racial identity created by their white oppressors. These religious communicants proposed instead that their rightful identity transcended the boundaries of the United States and marked them as members of a world community of peoples of

color who should devote themselves to ending white supremacist colonialism.

In this article, I examine the rise of "black ethnics" in the context of religious movements that became active during the world war years such as black Judaism, the Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA), the Nation of Islam, and the Ethiopianism promoted by the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). I focus specifically on black Judaism and the Moorish Science Temple to explain the turn toward ethnic identity manifested in these religions. The concern with ethnic identity is especially evident in these religions to the degree adherents claimed a distinctive nationality, in the sense of possessing a heritage or culture. Such claims specified religious, linguistic, aesthetic, and geographic origins that were pre-American. In what follows, I first explain the idea of ethnicity by briefly describing its history of use by sociologists. After identifying dominant trends in the historiography of black ethnic religions, I interpret some critical dimensions of the Moorish Science Temple and black Judaism as products of an ethnic turn in African American religions. I end by advancing the pivotal argument of this article: these new religious movements promoted theologies and practices of ethnic heritage that redeemed converts from social death, a condition marking them as people without peoplehood, relegated as nonmembers of the American nation. The result was a new religious order that asserted blacks were a people with peoplehood, with history and heritage that transcended the space and time of the American experience of slavery and racism.

My analysis of black ethnic religions should not be mistaken for advocating that blacks *really are* ethnic or that new black religions of the early 1900s were somehow more authentic than mainstream Afro-Protestant religion, which held no explicit interest in pre-American ethnic histories. I emphasize, instead, that ethnicity is first and foremost a discourse, a thoroughly historical construction. Ethnicity reflects worldly interests fundamentally rooted in the anxieties over membership in an American nation-state whose primordial content and scope has persistently been inscribed through exclusive white racial subjectivity. Ethnicity, most succinctly, is best understood as the discursive strategy that emerged to contain the excess of meanings about difference that remained after white Americans gradually reconceived the hierarchy of various European races as one overarching white race; ethnicity articulated difference among whites through the vocabularies of culture instead of biology.[7] By branding these religious movements as ethnic, I am foregrounding their interest in signifying the capacity for heritage, culture, and a socially meaningful

claim to pre-American history, all of which are freely granted to non-blacks as a matter of course. The emergence of black ethnic religions, then, should not be read with litmus-test in hand to determine whether black Jews or Moorish Americans were promoting a real or fake ethnicity. The emergence of black ethnic religions induces, rather, a more careful assessment of what is certainly a set of American claims to pre-American heritage—achieved by rendering novel meanings to scriptures, religious genealogies, aesthetics, etc.—as one set of data that explains why tens of thousands of African Americans embraced this particular means of pursuing status and membership in the American nation-state.

The American Specter of Ethnicity

The idea of ethnicity, of course, is not strictly delimited by use of the word *ethnicity*. The term *ethnicity* itself would come into use, in fact, only in the 1940s.[8] Its emergence in the linguistic currency of sociology, furthermore, would derive from efforts to study European immigration to the United States. The question, rather, of the American history of ideas about ethnicity rightly concerns the array of meanings about pre-American histories, heritage, language, mores, religion, and the related distinct markers of identity (reflected, for instance, in the use of *nationality*, which was in currency before *ethnicity*). The academic, theoretical study of ethnicity was derived largely through interpreting race and culture, most notably among social scientists who understood their work to bear immediate implications for resolving racial disparity and conflict. For this reason, the approaches to studying African Americans that W. E. B. Du Bois advanced fairly early weigh heavily here. Du Bois had studied sociological methods in Germany during the 1880s and applied what was then a new science to interpret America's system of racial taxonomy. He was the first social scientist to produce a significant body of theory on African Americans as subjects and agents of culture. As early as the 1890s, he advanced the then novel claim that being black meant more than merely being biologically different from whites or socially marginal. He would make this argument in a number of venues, but the two most familiar are certainly his *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and his address in 1897 to the American Negro Academy, "Conservation of Races." Du Bois would eventually abandon ideas of biological racialism while continuing to emphasize that slavery had not emptied America's Africans of any and all things African. He pointed to the presence of African religions during slavery and noted especially the development of the spirituals as evidence for the human capacity of

blacks as bearers and arbiters of culture.[9] Despite producing a significant body of sociological writings that interpreted African American identity in cultural terms, Du Bois was more of a lone voice crying out in the wilderness of academic scholarship until the 1920s and 1930s, at which point several other African American intellectuals such as Zora Neal Hurston, Carter G. Woodson, and Alain Locke began to advance the view that blacks were distinguished by a distinctive culture and not by cultural depravity. Woodson was especially influential in referencing Africa as the fount and anchor of African American identity.[10]

The more explicit aim of reading African American identity as ethnic with the conscientious attempt to disturb the exclusive association of ethnicity with white immigrants emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Nathan Glazer and Patrick Moynihan mounted a studied response to the radical critiques of black liberation activists, who increasingly called for creating a separate black nation-state to ensure authentic democracy (self-determinism) for African Americans. Glazer argued that blacks were best viewed as an ethnic group, not as a biologically distinct race, and that they would eventually achieve equality and integrate into a socially and economically mobile mainstream just as America's white ethnics had done. Glazer and Moynihan pointed to New York City's history of ethnic absorption as the guiding paradigm. While promoting an "ethnic" interpretation of African Americans, however, they were nonetheless reticent to apply fully this model in cultural terms, arguing that blacks lacked a foreign heritage. This adumbrated the prevailing wisdom among most social scientists of the time: if blacks had a culture, it was one of poverty and deprivation; their culture, in other words, consisted of *not having* culture and not inhabiting the phenomenal world of historical agency. This meant blackness was fundamentally defined by an oppressed status, not cultural heritage. Or, as Glazer and Moynihan opined during the 1960s, "It is not possible for Negroes to view themselves as other ethnic groups viewed themselves . . . because the Negro is only an American, and nothing else. He has no culture and values to guard and protect."[11]

Meanwhile, other American social scientists began to question whether the common dyad of "blacks and ethnics" obscured a more complicated reality in which blacks *were* ethnic in the full sense by which this was applied to white ethnics—denoting cultural difference. One catalyst for this revisionist double-take was the cultural revolution that attended the Black Power movement of the 1970s; scholars were fascinated with this public articulation of pride, the widely popular association of blackness with foreign territory (Africa), and

celebration of a black identity that seemed to mirror what they had already considered to be heritage identities among white ethnics.[12] It was in this spirit that sociologist Ronald Taylor asserted in 1979 that ethnicity was not the sole property of white immigrants. Blacks could also be, and in fact were, ethnic. He aimed not to trivialize the differentiating role of antiblack racism but, rather, to recognize that similar social forces created ethnic awareness among blacks and white immigrants. He proffered, in other words, that blacks inhabited a social and symbolic world of identity and existence that operated to distinguish them from the mainstream (i.e., middle-class whites). Taylor based this assertion on his claim that certain structural conditions (residential segregation, a network of familial relations of support, collaborative efforts to advance their political empowerment, and separate institutions such as churches or clubs), more so than culture, were responsible for constituting ethnicity among white immigrants.[13]

Taylor was beginning to recognize what Werner Sollors would soon thereafter fully develop and popularize—the deconstructive assessment that recognized ethnicity as neither a natural essence nor an ontology but rather as the historically achieved process of "inventing" identity through imaginative representation.[14] Sollors would go on to demonstrate that the biological-versus-socio-cultural dichotomy for categorizing ethnic identity was illusory because even the "biological" foundations of ethnic categories were already socially encoded; various populations interpreted the body in different ways based on how they had been taught to give meaning to physical (e.g., even olfactory) "data." In other words, ethnicity was no more natural or innate than racial identity. It was an invented category made real through the power of representation and perception. Americans have learned to recognize *signs* of ethnicity. In this way, Sollors accomplished analytically for ethnicity what Benedict Anderson demonstrated about the nation-state: its reality is achieved through imaginative, creative perception and participation and not through any innate features or ontological essence. Sollors's analysis of ethnicity is especially compelling because it reflexively historicized the social scientific effort to locate ethnicity.

Ethnicity's linkage to histories of labor, which Werner Sollors does not examine, has been ably assessed by Immanuel Wallerstein. Taking South Africa's taxonomy of races as exemplum—Coloreds, blacks, whites, Indians—Wallerstein applies labor theory to interpret peoplehood broadly and arrives at conclusions similar to those of Sollors but with some pivotal differences. He notes three forms of peoplehood: the nation, race, and ethnicity (as he rightly notes, few writers employ the term *people* or *peoplehood*). Wallerstein is most helpful when

he observes that all forms of peoplehood are constructed as a means of making claims about the past in order to prescribe how people should behave in the present. In other words, ethnicity, nationalism, and racial identity all function by transforming a useful past into a collective identity that commits those identified to a certain order of things. Peoplehood is "a tool persons use against each other . . . a central element in . . . the maintenance of group solidarity, in the establishment of or challenge to social legitimation." The problem is that this past is itself dynamic and inconstant. How long has there been a white race or an American people? Who has populated the field of these referents? From the historical record, it is clear that, at different times, the peoples included or signified by these peoplehoods have changed, often drastically. Wallerstein points to the fact that few nation-states recognized today existed before 1450. And just how many races are there, after all? Three? Eight? Fifteen? Whereas most observers, furthermore, will easily recognize the linkage between nationalism and state boundaries, the correlation between ethnic groups and states is less obvious but nonetheless persistent—the United States has Hispanics, but not Mexico or Venezuela. Nigeria's Igbos and Yorubas are blacks in Britain and the United States.[15]

The fruitfulness of Wallerstein's reading of ethnicity through labor theory is realized when he demonstrates the correlation between ethnic group and class. Although the latter is an analytical category that describes relations of power—versus the former as a peoplehood—the boundaries of wage differentiation largely correlate with those of ethnic identity. This is so because, as Wallerstein posits, modern capitalism productively employs peoplehood to render class differences natural and thus intelligible and palatable. Thus, it is no accident that America's "white ethnics" were immigrants occupying the lower tier of an urban wage structure and that their American-born descendants began to shed their ethnic baggage primarily by ascending the ladder of class through further education, white-collar jobs, and higher wages. It is crucial to note, however, that the "ethnic baggage" that distinguished white ethnics from "ordinary" (i.e., white) Americans was, in the eyes of "ordinary" blacks, a badge of honor. The meanings about habits, mores, and other cultural markers that seemed to burden white ethnics derived from the impression that they bore the imprint of pre-American histories or foreign heritage from foreign lands in Europe. America's black descendants of slaves and ex-slaves, by contrast, despite being denied the privileges of full membership in the nation, were not perceived as being from someplace else; they were from "right here." Centuries of slavery had functioned to annihilate the genealogical ties that would have otherwise imbued America's blacks with a similar

bearing of heritage. This is why ethnicity, for blacks, would have been not baggage but a symbol of honor and status.

When Wallerstein identifies the cultural function of peoplehood as staking claims about the past to engage contemporary interests, he provides valuable insight for making sense of an emerging ethnic awareness in some of America's black religions of the early twentieth century. This analytical method, in line with that of Sollors, can enable scholars to perceive at least two things about peoplehood. First, it has been achieved through historical agencies by encoding and representing human subjects. Second, peoplehood is susceptible to or can manifest as racial taxonomy, and it can reveal the linkage between American exceptionalism and the American history of constructing whiteness. From a different angle, one can recognize the maxim that "blacks cannot be ethnic" or that "ethnicity is unique to white immigrants," not as veridical insights, but as claims that denied the capacity for heritage to the very racial group (America's black descendants of ex-slaves) who had already been denied the status of culture bearers. The taxonomic move adumbrated in "blacks and ethnics," then, has functioned in a dissembling fashion to represent a relation of power (here, the power to deny the humanizing discourse of culture or history/"pastness" to African Americans) as an ontologically verifiable truth—blacks cannot be ethnic.

The Rise of Black Ethnics: Afro-Asia and Diaspora

Some of the most forceful twentieth-century theologies of black ethnicity appeared in the African American communities of Judaism and Islam. Both of these religious traditions offered a compelling answer to the pressing question of black Americans, What was the original religion of blacks? The fact that these religions offered different rejoinders misses the point. The potency of black ethnic religions, rather, lay in their ability to pose such a novel question in order to make an ethnic experience of religion socially real for American blacks. The significance of this ethnic turn is especially visible in the religious reasoning of the black Rabbi Wentworth Arthur Matthew and the Moorish American prophet "Noble" Drew Ali.

Black Jews

Soon after Wentworth Arthur Matthew arrived in the United States in 1919, he joined Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, which emphasized the importance of black theology; Garvey insisted that formal religious creeds and symbols needed

to augur black pride and reflect the imperatives of race uplift as a divine concern. Matthew, who began his career in religious leadership as a Christian Pentecostal minister, gradually began to develop a vision for "reclaiming" an ancient Jewish heritage of blacks.[16] Matthew perceived a history and genealogy of ancient Africans in the narrative traditions about ancient Israel. He rejected the conventional interpretations of the Noah legend, which identified Ham exclusively as the ancestor of Africans. This Hamitic myth of African ancestry had for centuries been used to represent Africans as ethnic heathens, idolatrous by heritage.[17] Matthew conceded that ancient Africans were initially the exclusive offspring of Ham. But he then went on to assert a boldly different version of this biblical genealogy: when Abraham's descendants (Shem's progeny) went into Egypt, they intermingled with Ham's Egyptian descendants. It was this population of people, the seed of *both* Ham and Shem, who made the Exodus out of Egypt and into Canaan, becoming the nation of ancient Israel. Matthew would impress upon his followers that Moses himself had married the *Ethiopian* daughter of a black Midianite priest. For this reason, Matthew identified Moses' two sons as the first "Ethiopian Hebrews," a term he used to identify both the biblical ancestors of blacks and contemporary black Jews.[18]

Of even greater significance in establishing the lineage of these Ethiopian Hebrews, however, was Matthew's explanation of their relationship with ancient Israel's celebrated sage ruler, Solomon. Candace, the Queen of Sheba, cultivated diplomatic relations with Solomon and, according to the Kebra Nagast, eventually produced a son with Solomon, Menelik.[19] This Menelik, Matthew advanced, was the founder of a lineage that stretched all the way down to Haile Selassie I, whose uncle was Menelik the Great. Most important for Matthew was the fact that the Falasha Jews of Ethiopia had attracted international attention in the early twentieth century. Matthew's critics might easily ridicule his genealogical narrative, but it was far more difficult to deny the presence of Ethiopia's black Jews. They practiced a form of Judaism whose lineage was independent of European Judaism (the latter was derived from Rabbinic Judaism). The Falasha Jews, in other words, practiced a religion that more closely resembled the temple-based Israelite religion that existed before the emergence of synagogue-based Judaism.[20] It was left to Matthew to show that these Ethiopian Jews were practicing the "original religion" of blacks and that this Hebrew legacy belonged to all of the African Diaspora.

Even more significant was Matthew's decision to foreground slavery in the Americas as a history of heritage destruction. That Judaism was the "original religion" of African peoples was certainly

news to his prospective converts. Matthew subverted the supposed eccentricity of his theological claims by explaining why most blacks had never heard of this history: he interpreted Atlantic slavery as an experience of ethnic destruction. This, he explained, was why Africans throughout the Diaspora and even throughout Africa were separated from knowledge about their historical Hebrew religion. The work of black Judaism, as he understood it, lay preeminently in reclaiming the Ethiopian Hebrew legacy and "restoring" to Africans the ethnic heritage that slavery and colonialism had elided.

Once Matthew became persuaded of a black Jewish heritage, he gradually established the theology and institutional plans that led to the Congregation of Commandment Keepers, one of several sects of black Judaism. Reading scriptures in Hebrew, following a kosher diet, wearing unique clothing—these signifying practices were a vital means of representing blackness *qua* distinctive, pre-American, religious, and honorable. By the time of his death in 1973, Matthew's Beth Ha-Tephila Ethiopian Congregation (as the Congregation of Commandment Keepers was renamed) of One West 123 Street in Harlem comprised more than 250 members. He had also established the Ethiopian Hebrew Rabbinical College and the Royal Order of Aethiopian Hebrews, a fraternal society instituted to supplement the work of the synagogue.[21]

Moorish Americans

A second vital religious community that began to assert a black ethnic identity during the early twentieth century was the Moorish Science Temple of America, which was founded by Timothy Drew. Drew would come to identify himself as "Noble" Drew Ali, the divinely inspired messenger—a prophet—whose salvific message to "so-called Negroes" achieved its soteriology primarily through its revelation that blacks possessed a distinctive "nationality." (Drew claimed that his religious community began as the Canaanite Temple in New Jersey in 1913, but a lack of historical corroboration makes this doubtful.) At the heart of this message was the proclamation that these so-called Negroes were, in fact, Moorish Americans, descended from the ancient Moabites, among whom the biblical Ruth was a celebrated ancestor.[22] By adopting the term Moorish, Ali was able to exploit a rich etymological history that had been used by Europeans until the nineteenth century to denote Muslims who were not necessarily black (particularly those inhabiting the Iberian peninsula since the eighth century C.E.) and blacks who were not necessarily Muslim, often interchangeably.[23] Ali taught that Moorish Americans possessed

an ancient history and had practiced a distinct ethnic religion—Islam. As a prophet, he presented to these Moorish Americans their own "divinely prepared" scriptures, the Circle Seven Koran, which related some history of the Moabites and other Canaanite peoples and also described the activities of Jesus in Asiatic lands.

The principal revelation that Ali proclaimed to his followers was that so-called Negroes possessed a distinctive ethnic heritage. He believed that, if black Americans embraced their true Moorish "nationality" (as he termed it), the U.S. government under which they lived and all other nations would respect so-called Negroes and would regard them as a dignified people with history who merited respect. The response to Ali's message of Moorish redemption was considerable. In Chicago, where the MSTA first began, Moorish Americans commanded public respectability until Ali's suspicious death in 1929. Their public celebrations of an ancient Moorish heritage drew large crowds that included local political leaders. Ali established a factory to produce oils, incense, soaps, and other Moorish products, the sales from which buoyed the religion's financial base. From New York City to Kansas City, Kansas, to Belzoni, Mississippi, the MSTA converts established temples and vibrant communities of converts with a penetrating message of ethnic renewal that urged followers to cast aside the deadening façade of so-called Negro identity and to reclaim a heritage that stretched from ancient Palestine to Arabia and the Muslim empires in Eurasia and Africa.

Especially important were the concrete elements of the religion that symbolized ethnic difference. Followers received a change in name by adding the suffix "Bey" or "El" to denote their Moorish ancestry. They paid membership dues of a nominal amount (ranging from fifty cents to two dollars) and, in exchange, received membership cards certifying that their identity was not Negro but Moorish American. Male members wore fezzes to distinguish themselves from other Americans. Men and women donned robes in keeping with an Eastern style of dress. Of inestimable importance, furthermore, was the Circle Seven Koran, the MSTA's book of scripture that Ali himself published. This, in addition to the instructional literature of the religion, grounded followers in a compelling worldview that identified them not merely as victims of antiblack racism but also as a distinct people whose past stretched beyond the destructive episode of American racial hatred and whose mission was to reclaim their lost heritage.[24]

After his death, Ali's status as a prophet intensified, and his message of worldwide solidarity with other peoples of color opposed to white colonialism took on unprecedented urgency during the 1930s and 1940s as more nations joined the Second World War. As new

converts continued to absorb Ali's injunction to reject so-called Negro identity, they reasoned that segregation laws were not applicable to Moorish Americans and were inspired to defy the legal framework of American apartheid. The insurgency of MSTA theology reached its pinnacle when the United States executed the Selective Service Act to press young men into the draft; leaders of the MSTA instructed their followers to abstain from military service to an imperial American government that denied them basic human and civil rights.

Overdetermined Subjects: Re-reading Black Ethnics

Over several decades, scholarly studies of African American Jews and Muslims have largely shifted from cynicism and thinly veiled derision to serious engagement that presumes these subjects concern authentic religious expressions. In the case of African American Islam, C. Eric Lincoln's *Black Muslims* set the tone for a generation of scholarship that, to Lincoln's credit, made African American Islam a respectable subject of study but that also employed a *sui generis* notion of religion to identify the political theology and social concern of "Black Muslims" as unassailable evidence that scholars were dealing with a quintessentially Black Nationalist protest movement masquerading as religion.[25] Since that time, a plethora of scholars in multiple disciplines like sociology, history, and religious studies have examined African American Islam with the unequivocal view that their subject of study is veritable Islam. Despite this trend, however, other scholarly studies of Islam among African Americans continue to emphasize that black Muslims practice a religion or quasi-religion that is invented and syncretistic or hybrid, something other than Islam proper. It seems almost mandatory to rehearse, with this aim in mind, that Noble Drew Ali's Circle Seven Koran was plagiarized from contemporary mystery texts like the Aquarian Gospel or to show that his knowledge of Islam depended on the diffuse ideas about the "Orient" and "Moorish mysteries" in American popular thought. Some recent studies have taken exception to those scholars who examine the Moorish Science Temple of America as actual Islam. Richard Brent Turner and Aminah McCloud specifically have been critiqued for putatively being "swayed by Ali's use of the term 'Islam'" and thereby substituting "political correctness" for rigorous method. In the language of one dissenting interpreter, the MSTA practiced not "scriptural Islam" but rather a form of "black Spiritualist Freemasonry." This response derives from an American-versus-Muslim binary logic that identifies "overwhelming direct evidence Noble Drew Ali left us in his writings and his actions that his influences were not

Muslim but rather distinctly American."[26] Even a progressive scholar like Hebert Berg, whose most recent scholarship defends the place of Elijah Muhammad among the legacy figures of Islam, seems unable to fathom the Moorish Science Temple as "real" Islam.[27] Other leading scholars of African American Islam have taken exception to these same criticisms, however. Edward Curtis IV has critiqued the tendency to relegate African American Islam as a heresy (comparing it to "traditional" Islam in the Middle East) or fakery. This tendency, on the one hand, assumes a fictitious homogeneity of scriptural or orthodox Islam that is foreign and, on the other hand, positions American identity in opposition to Islamic identity. This logic would lead one to conclude Islam could not *possibly* be an American religion.[28] Such a criterion of homogeneous orthodoxy is never applied to European Protestantism (it is still Christianity) nor to America's Southern Baptists (they are still Protestants). Despite the fact that multiple scholars have robustly critiqued the use of orthodoxy to portray African American Islam as fraudulent or heretical religion, some recent histories of religion nevertheless continue to regard black Islam, in the words of one writer, as an expression of America's "creative 'Protestant' fringe," a "bizarre synthesis of black nationalism, anti-Catholicism, and fantastic pseudo-scientific lore" tinged by a faint "*idea* of Islam."[29]

The scholarship on black Judaism, like that on African American Islam, has evolved considerably over the years. Black Judaism's emergence from African American churches became an impetus for many scholars to regard it as artificial and contrived. Early writers like Howard Brotz, Israel J. Gerber, and Morris Lounds were centrally concerned with "exposing" black Judaism as religious fraud or demagoguery. These interpreters sought to reveal that African Americans had usurped a false claim to the heritage of "real" Jews (i.e., those of European descent) as a means of political expediency and social protest. Explaining the secular motives behind black Judaism supposedly meant that one could *explain away* black Judaism itself as an absurdity deriving from pathology. More recently, however, a number of scholars have engaged black Judaism with explicit seriousness as veritable religion. This more recent literature dispenses with proffering an *apologia* for "authentic" Judaism and focuses, instead, on examining the function and sociality of a black Jewish religion that is itself not targeted for dismissal or derision. There is every indication that this trend will continue.[30]

It is in this vein that Yvonne Chireau and Nathaniel Deutsch have produced what is arguably the most concerted and laudable effort to evoke a more complex account of American Jewish identity. Their co-edited volume interprets the encounter between African

Americans and Judaism and, by so doing, extends the study of "black-Jewish relations" to religion. Chireau and Deutsch emphasize that the "very existence" of African American Jews forecloses on any easy equation of Jewish identity with a single race; in fact, they are careful to note that the very term "black-Jewish" imposes a dichotomy that cannot be rightly assumed. Despite such careful injunctions, however, the means by which they otherwise frame their study of African Americans' encounter with Judaism seems to reestablish a persisting binary of black-versus-Jewish. The problem stems from their tendency to refrain from articulating whiteness while centrally relying on white racial subjects (vis-à-vis blacks) to organize meanings about real Jewishness. In other words, it is difficult to read their introduction to the volume without understanding that the discursive "Jewishness" that is encountered by their discursive "African Americans" (which they interchange with "blacks") is *white* or *European* and therefore exclusively authentic and normative.[31]

The expansion of whiteness studies has encouraged the critical edge that some researchers have brought to bear on understanding the racialized history of American Jewish identities. Roberta Gold has squarely tackled the refusal of most European American Jews to recognize the Commandment Keepers and other blacks as Jews while easily embracing white atheists as authentically Jewish. At stake, she explains, was the opportunity for Euro-American Jews of the twentieth century to join a racially homogenous body politic of whites; racially or culturally affiliating with blacks would surely have undermined that prospect. Henry Goldschmidt, furthermore, has been especially innovative by explaining how Judaism (among Lubavitchers) has centrally depended upon "making race" to define Jewishness in opposition to blackness or gentile whiteness or investing exclusively in blackness (in the case of Hebrew Israelites) as the authentic phenotype of Jewishness. This approach articulates whiteness as a performative and deeply consequential identity that is essential to mapping American Judaism, and it overcomes the elliptical representation of an ostensibly nonracial Jewish identity that otherwise undermines the semantic coherence of "black Jews."[32] In these and other similar studies, black Judaism is not an illusion but one of multiple "real," socially constituted (unnatural *qua* historical) identities anchored in the larger tapestry of religious/racial constructions.

Despite such impressive advances in the scholarly attention to African American Judaism, the presumptive or concerted denial of authenticity to black Jews is a perduring issue that continues to feature in the work of *some* writers.[33] The most elaborate recent study of black Judaism, in fact, explicitly reserves the terms *Judaism* and *Jewish*

for religion manifested exclusively among European or Euro-American practitioners; in this arrangement, "Black Judaism" is strictly a "form of black social protest, as opposed to a form of Jewish expression," that emerged largely through African American religious efforts to mimic white Jews in hopes of mitigating Jim Crow oppression.[34] This problem of interpreting black religions as mild pretensions or outright fakery has persisted in some recent studies of black ethnic religions and is due to at least three methodological and conceptual problems.

First is the failure to take seriously the careful attention religious studies scholars have cultivated toward elucidating the study of religion itself as a historical enterprise born in the matrix of colonial reasoning that *relegates* dominated peoples and unorthodox religion. As a result, those studies that situate black ethnic religions as heretical seem disturbingly similar to the orthodoxy that guided early modern comparisons of religions and that explained non-Christian religions as decadent perversions of true religion or as futile inventions that emerged in the absence of revealed religion.[35]

Second is the failure to historicize established religions while exoticizing new ones, which means that mainstream forms of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are not required to pass the muster of historicity in order to be recognized as authentic religions; new religions, however, are portrayed as uniquely contrived. The validity of the dominant varieties of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, for example, does not hinge on the historicity of figures like Abraham and Moses (these are figures of legend, not history). Nor does it matter that the resurrection of Jesus is an idea of faith and not a historical fact. And were it not for the practice among religious authors of borrowing wholesale or piecemeal from pre-existing textual traditions (our contemporary term for this is *plagiarism*), mainstream Jews, Muslims, Christians, and Buddhists would have little to show for scriptures. All religions are invented—scriptures are richly dependent upon pre-existing material—the Bible, Qur'an, Book of Mormon, Bhagavad Gita. Practices are always eclectic—ritual ablutions, sacrifice, music, etc., in the "great world religions." All derive from intersubjective responses to and participation in political, economic, social, and ideological realms. Yet, *none* of these data function to undermine the authentic status of established religions, nor should they. *New* religions, however, are most frequently held to an impossible standard of historicity and pinned far beneath a specious bar of purity that brands them as fake.

Third is the failure to rigorously theorize ethnicity, instead treating it as a natural essence and then assuming that black ethnic claims are fictitious. This problem, unlike the first two, is especially

germane to the study of black ethnic religions. In essence, historians have "over-determined the subject" when studying black ethnic religions. The fact that these religions appeal to an ethnic past that is not delimited by American geography and history seems to have made them especially susceptible to being studied as inventions, fakery, and contrivances. By fixating on the imaginative, creative emergence of these religions, some scholars have speciously positioned black ethnic religions as the fundamental conundrum to be explained—why on earth would these religious subjects have invented a religious identity and pretended to be something (Jewish or Muslim) they were not?

This certainly does not mean that the emergence of new religions should be shielded from disciplined inquiry; every dimension and aspect of human experience must remain open to intellectual study. The attention of scholars to the "eclecticism" and "hybridity" of these new religions has been an important contribution and remains essential to continuing research. But when representing syncretism is its own end, it becomes a fictitious interpretation of a particular religion's uniqueness. With this in mind, our concern with black ethnic religions should lead us to examine the usefulness of black ethnic religions as data for interpreting the problems of racial taxonomy and the nation-state. This would mean that our analytical energies should be spent explicating not the "eclectic other" but, rather, the histories of domination that render meaningful the myriad religious phenomena—from "exotic" to "banal"—and the enterprise of observing and interpreting them. Those studies that have moved beyond overdetermining these subjects, in other words, are best positioned to understand fundamental relations of power that are amplified in sites of liminality—in this instance, among African American religions whose makers and participants grounded their religion in the pursuit of heritage.

Anticolonial Theology, Scriptures, and Ethnogenesis

The relationship between claiming heritage, on the one hand, and the problems inherent to existing beneath the underside of a hierarchical racial political order, on the other, is precisely what merits further analysis to render a more exacting view of what I have termed black ethnic religions. This relationship comes to light when we consider the decolonizing/anticolonial effects of theology in the MSTA and Commandment Keepers with respect to colonial paradigms of race and history. In this vein, I focus on four domains: cultural destruction, religious particularity, temporalities, and ethnic naming. These themes posed theological problems to which Wentworth Matthew and Drew Ali responded by reconceiving religious identity

as ethnogenesis (the source of peoplehood). When they did so, they were promoting an anticolonial theology that won a decisive following among African Americans.

Narrating Cultural Destruction

The most consequential epistemic shift effected by black ethnic religions was their claim that Christianization and slavery were essentially processes of cultural destruction. With some exceptions such as Vodun in the Creole South,[36] African American religions of the late-nineteenth century typically embraced the Christian salvation myth and its civilizing mission by celebrating the Christianizing process as the teleological result of the Middle Passage and American slavery. The Ethiopianism promoted by nineteenth-century activists like Lott Carey, Anna Julia Cooper, and Henry McNeal Turner described the trans-Atlantic slave trade as an escape from a heathen land, a divinely orchestrated redemption from African evil. The missionary religion that was unleashed among ex-slaves after the Civil War emphasized that Christianization would achieve racial uplift and redeem converts from African decadence. This focus on what Wilson Jeremiah Moses has termed the "Fortunate Fall" idea meant that slavery and European colonialism were conceived as divine agencies that ultimately redeemed black people from languishing in the Dark Continent, beguiled by Satanic religion, spiritually frozen in their centuries-old rebellion against the biblical deity.[37] Although inchoate during the nineteenth century in the theological and racial analysis of a very small number of black writers like Edward Blyden, the unmitigated rejection of Christianity as ethnically or racially specific (European or "white" religion) and thus ill-suited to African peoples would be fully expressed only with the flowering of black ethnic religions in the twentieth century.[38]

Within the Moorish Science Temple, this "knowledge" that Christianity was alien to African Americans was explicitly advanced in Noble Drew Ali's Circle Seven Koran. Ali located the origins of Christianity within the Roman Empire; Christianity, in his theology of history, was the religion of the "pale skin" European Romans who executed the Moabite (Asiatic) prophet Jesus, whose mission, according to Ali, was to rescue the Jewish nation from rule by the "pale skin nations of Europe," thereby effecting an explicit salvation against colonialism. As the Circle Seven Koran explained to readers, European Christians, after executing Jesus, enjoyed a peaceful existence for many centuries until "Muhammad the first" (i.e., Muhammad Ibn Abdallah) arrived on the scene to "fulfill the will of Jesus."[39]

Matthew was even more pointed in his rejection of Christianity. Referring to the liturgical elements that characterized black churches as "niggeritions," he was fond of associating Christianity with decadence. In other words, Matthew chose to deride Christianity by demeaning the Christian worship of African American migrants from the South whose cultural proclivities toward rhythmic dance and spirit possession were drastically transforming the religious landscape of the urban North. In his sermons, he often mimicked the dialect and theology of African American Christians who had migrated from the South in order to persuade his congregants that Christianity was an inferior religion that was foreign to the true heritage of blacks. In one instance, for example, Matthew drew upon his audience's familiarity with popular biblical narrative to assert the supremacy of Judaism over the dull sterility of Christian.

> Israel came out on top all through the ages because our men knew how to call God. Do you think the three Hebrew boys who went into the fiery furnace went in saying "Lawdy Jesus"? They went into the furnace anointed with the oil of life. . . . Do you think Daniel cried, "Lawdy Jesus, save me," when he was thrown to the lions?[40]

His penchant for demeaning black southerners through mimicry exploited a dominant pattern of northern derision against southern migrants to achieve his larger point of denigrating Christianity. Matthew did not, in other words, reduce Christianity to Afro-Protestantism. Ultimately, Christianity was wrong because it was a gentile religion requiring blacks to abandon a pre-American heritage that, according to biblical chronology, was thousands of years old. To follow Christianity was to remain lost in a wayward religion into which blacks had been displaced through American slavery. This meant Christianity was simply unnatural for blacks. As one member of Matthew's synagogue described it,

> My grandfather, they tell me, was of pure African stock, and knew about the Hebrew language. But in slavery we had to take on the language and religion of our masters. But as Jeremiah says, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin? Can the leopard change his spots?"[41]

Religious Particularity

An important parallel exists between Matthew and Ali's rendering of Christianity as a specific ethnic or racial religion (Christianity stands here as the ethnic religion of a specific people—Europeans)

and the taxonomic knowledge produced by the humanistic enterprise that has queried the nature of religion as a *genus* by comparing the varieties of the world's religions. This humanistic strategy of mapping religion resulted from European colonialism and was induced by the myriad colonial contacts that compelled Enlightenment thinkers to view differently what was previously regarded as Christian/religious truth; eventually, the taxonomic imperative (the drive to classify and locate along a hierarchical order of things) induced an ironic turn in the Christian knowledge of *religion* that created, by contrast, a humanistic knowledge of *religions*.[42] This transformation among white (typically Christian) intellectuals did not necessarily dethrone supremacist Christianity—the colonial comparison of religions frequently functioned to reinscribe Christian white supremacy in secular and religious terms.[43] The philosophical shift from Christianity as religious truth to the Christian religion as *unum inter multos*, nevertheless, both intensified the burden of *representing* Christian supremacy and brokered the possibility of *undermining* Christian supremacist claims by *relegating* Christianity as a distinctly European religion. The taxonomic fallout of this epistemic shift is recapitulated, as Benedict Anderson has shown, in the dethronement of Latin from its status as the *lingua franca* of Christendom in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; under the pluralizing assault of the vulgar national languages like German, English, and French, Latin relinquished its pedestal of exceptionalism and receded into a pluralistic field of languages. Consequently, language itself began to function for Europeans as a means of elevating nationalisms—not the Christian people per se, but the *English* people and the *Anglican* Church; the German people and the Lutheran Church, etc.[44]

In the same way, black ethnic religions effected a pluralizing ideology, asserting that particular peoples should possess particular religions. This is the central efficacy of the ethnic turn in African American religions. In the words of Ali, every nation of people should "worship under their own vine and fig tree" so that, by returning Christianity to its rightful European owners, so-called Negroes themselves were returning to the Gods of their fathers. It should be evident, then, that by advancing the particularity of religions and by exploiting the fact that potential converts had never heard of what initially appeared to be *incredible* claims of ancient origins, black Judaism and the MSTA were inverting colonial ideas about universalism and particularity. In this field of knowledge, Christianity was a symbol of destruction and a violent means of inducing collective amnesia. Both of these religions in this way reinterpreted *Christianity as an alien religion of conquest* that produced a pivotal descent into concealing a religious heritage to which black ethnic theologies reawakened potential converts.[45]

Temporalities

Black ethnic religions also embraced a historical consciousness that, unlike the governing historiography, incorporated blacks as agents of history. This theological innovation, in other words, proffered an alternative mode of temporality (ideas about historical time) as rejoinder to an exceedingly difficult problem. When European colonizers displaced more than one million Africans into the United States, they also asserted a specific style of thinking about historical time that occluded world history by mapping colonial subjects onto the metaphysical cartography of Europe's Christian historiography.[46] Western Christian theology divided the world into scripturalized races descended from biblical characters, compelling religious innovators to turn to the Bible as a necessary means of becoming visible to history.[47] At the same time, secular observers of religion—ethnographers, philosophers, and historians—did not rely on necessarily theological constructions of time, at least not explicitly. Rather, they separated the world's races into primitives and moderns. Europe's recent history, thus, became a modern epoch that superseded a medieval, "Middle Age" of darkness (i.e., ruled by Muslim empires), which itself was a declension from the golden dawn of a Western (white) antiquity marked by Christian (Roman) *imperium*. This was perhaps the most confounding intellectual and psychological dimension of the Christian conquest of the Atlantic world. The effects have been so far-reaching that even the most critical contemporary scholarship regularly assumes the colonizing terms of this supersessionism, and people in every region of the world are indelibly shaped by the idea of living in the "Common Era," a deafening mysticism of chronology that thinly veils the way Christian supersessionism promotes the history and confessional formulas of a religion (*anno domini*) as an era of world-time (*saeculum*).[48]

Both the Moorish Science Temple and the Commandment Keepers formulated ethnic identity by recourse to a biblical repertoire of traditions about history, although structuring very different locations with respect to earlier loci of Jewish and Christian chosenness. In so doing, these religions asserted a black subjectivity that became visible to history by tethering themselves to corporate and individual biblical characters (such as Ham, Moses, Israel, and the Moabites). Matthew embraced a familiar cast of characters to occupy the locus of Israelite subjectivity, the most familiar symbol of chosenness in American religious thought. He reconfigured the racialization of ancient Hebrews first by establishing that the earliest humans (here, Adam and Eve) were multiracial progenitors and, subsequently, by representing

Israelites as the progeny of both Ham and Shem, both of whom he concluded were black progenitors. In startling departure from this Israelite focus, Moorish Americans celebrated descent from the ancient Moabites (one of the Canaanite nations) and consanguinity with Jesus. Ali never denied that Jesus was Jewish, but Ali's decision to exploit the Bible's claim of Jesus' Moabite ancestry to establish linkage with the Canaanite nations (already portrayed as dark-skinned rogues in the graphical depictions of Christian biblical commentary) could hardly have been more clever. This maneuver allowed Ali to invert the centripetal hermeneutics of scripture that otherwise centered on a privileged Israelite identity. Ali stands apart from almost every other American theologian who has scripturalized race because he explicitly privileged identification with Canaanites, the most despised heathens of biblical narrative. By embracing a Canaanite identity in juxtaposition to the usual favored subjects of biblical narrative (Israelites), Ali ensured that he could represent in favorable terms the identity of Moorish Americans as [pre-]American people whose Islamic religion and Afro-Asiatic heritage were also beyond the pale of favored American subjectivity.

Of course, neither Ali nor Matthew could then address the empirical history of Africans. As a descendant of ex-slaves in the Atlantic world, neither of these two theologians of black ethnicity could speak to the actual repression of African Orisha religions in the New World (including, for example, the public murder of African priests and the widespread missionary portrayals of African religions as Satanic), or the violent encounter with the biblical world that situated their temporal dilemma from the start.[49] By immersing themselves in the ideas of biblical history, they became captive to colonial ideologies of world-historical time. In slightly different language, one can observe that they became visible to a historical purview that further undermined their ability to conceive of historical time except as a projection of social identities (e.g., biblical, Muslim). (This is what some writers have described as "identitarian time"—particular identities appear as an objective, universal era of world history.) Because they employed the historical consciousness of scriptural thinking and secular mapping of the historical world (of which empirical Africa was no part), they were once again prevented from developing a philosophy of history decoupled from supersessionism. In fairness, of course, contemporary historians must acknowledge that it would have been unlikely for these theologians of black ethnicity, given their context, to imagine circumnavigating the historical consciousness that Western colonialism produced. Theirs was a style of representing modern subjectivity erected on pillars secular and religious. This

perspective of time germane to Western colonialism derived from a centuries-old legacy of a "typological imaginary" by which Western Christians, for instance, had entrapped contemporary European Jews as people belonging to an ancient time with no place in the contemporary world.[50] This mode of imagining history anchored temporal thinking within the assumptions of specific identities shifting among Christian, biblical, European, Western, and modern.

Foreignness, Language, and Ethnic Naming

Among the most provocative ritual strategies of black ethnic religions was that of renaming converts in order to signify roots or genealogies that transcended the bounds of Americanness, forging links to pre-American origins and transnational identities to underscore the idea that so-called Negroes possessed an actual heritage. The Moorish Science Temple provided converts with suffixes of either "Bey" or "El" to be appended to their existing surnames; these were the names of the two Moorish tribes, Ali taught, from whom all Moorish Americans had descended. So, for instance, when Charles Kirkman joined Ali's Moorish movement, he changed his name to C. Kirkman-Bey (he would become the most prominent leader of the MSTA after Ali's death). By taking on these '"tribal" names, MSTA converts acknowledged and reclaimed their pre-American ancestry.

Efforts to deny the very possibility that America's black population could be ethnic surface in the early encounters between the MSTA and federal investigators particularly around renaming practices. In the 1930s, as the U.S. Department of Justice began to suppress the MSTA because they promoted racial equality and anticolonialism, the FBI grew frustrated by the MSTA's refusal to comply with American racial taxonomy; religious adherents denied being "Negroes." In response to this, one undercover agent was careful to note that his subject possessed "the appearance and characteristics of a full blooded negro,"[51] clearly indicating in his report that the self-designation of "Moorish" should not deter other authorities from recognizing that they were dealing with "ordinary,"' nonethnic black people. During the summer of 1942, FBI field agents in Kansas City, Kansas, organized mass detentions of local MSTA members who refused to register for the draft. The seventeen black men arrested, when interrogated, all insisted that they were Moorish. FBI agents were especially stupefied over the MSTA's Moorish surnames. The only explanation agents could muster was that the men were "religious fanatics" and "mentally unbalanced," opting to "assume either fictitious names or add to their own names in such a manner as to make them meaningless and

sound somewhat Arabic." Of course, these names were all about being *meaningful*, as the federal investigators themselves unwittingly indicated by recognizing an "Arabic" ethos to this nomenclature. Over the next twenty years, as federal agents were emboldened in their violent strategies of suppression, Moorish Americans would win a small victory; the FBI gradually stopped protesting "fake names" and began to assume some measure of religious legitimacy in Moorish American naming. Despite the initial ire over what they perceived to be the unreasonable audacity of "Negroes" to pretend to have a heritage that extended beyond the bounds of the American experience of slavery, by the 1950s, FBI field reports, at times, referred to members of the MSTA as "Moorish Americans" and consistently referred to MSTA members by their full Moorish names.[52]

Black Jews likewise asserted an ethos of foreignness, not by taking on new names but, instead, through speaking Yiddish and Hebrew. Arnold Ford, a close associate of Matthew who also led a black Jewish synagogue in Harlem, was careful to display publicly his fluency in Yiddish, the ethnic language so common among Ashkenazi Jews. Matthew himself employed Hebrew in naming the Commandment Keeper's synagogue—the Beth Ha-Tephila (House of Prayer). The synagogue was diligent in providing converts instruction in basic and advanced Hebrew.[53]

Among various communities of European Jews, of course, speaking and reading Hebrew, since the late nineteenth century, has constituted a practice of identifying as Jewish by distinguishing oneself from "gentiles," a category that over many centuries has variably or simultaneously denoted "Christian" or "Anglo" or "Arab" or otherwise non-Jewish. Many European American Jews of the nineteenth century decried the emerging use of English in synagogue services by pointing to the power of language to inscribe identity and to mark heritage boundaries. This was central to the activism of theologians like Sabato Morais, who led Conservative Judaism in dissent against the innovations of Reform Judaism, and Mordecai Kaplan, the American architect of Jewish Reconstructionism, a movement that synthesized the increasingly secularized significations of Jewishness into a bold claim that Judaism was more an ethnic heritage than a religion. It should come as no surprise that Matthew likewise recognized the efficacy of language to mark Jewish difference and thereby authenticate his claim to Hebraic heritage.[54]

Beyond representing ethnicity through language was the use of immigrant status to defy an easy association with "Negro" identity. Matthew's origins will probably never be known with certainty, although it seems clear that he lived in the West Indies before arriving

in the United States. He alternately claimed Nigeria, Liberia, and Ethiopia as his native land. Many members of his congregation, moreover, had immigrated to Harlem from the Caribbean. The earliest reports of black Jews in the urban North evidence claims of descent from black Jewish families in "the East," the Caribbean, or African nations like Ethiopia.[55] Through a variety of means, then, followers of the black ethnic religions in the early twentieth century signified a foreign identity as a means of claiming heritage.

Conclusion

Rather than impugning the Commandment Keepers and MSTA with pretending to be ethnic, it is more appropriate to recognize that ethnicity was the discursive milieu that so richly animated the vivacity of their theology. It becomes imperative, furthermore, to ask what American inventions of ethnic religion reveal about America itself (the specter of the nation-state and its apparatus of governmentality) and about the powerful interests at stake in the assertions of identity that proceed from black ethnic religions. Or, as Werner Sollors has queried, "Is not the ability of ethnicity to present (or invent) itself as a natural and timeless category the problem to be tackled? Are not ethnic groups part of the historical process, tied to the history of modern nationalism?"[56]

Histories of domination demand a rigorous hermeneutics that does not collapse into exoticizing those on the underside of ostensibly innocent categories like American freedom and nation-state democracy.[57] The consequences of racial hatred, state-sanctioned inequality, and exclusion from national belonging were brutal realities rooted in the social texture of American racial, imperial power; this was the abyss from which black ethnic religions sought redemption. Thus, no keen interpreter of religion should rest content with exoticizing black Jews and Moorish Americans as bizarre and dilettante.[58] Identifying black ethnic religion as a dissembling invention presumes that our task is to explain the pathological behavior of black religious subjects; this religious history, as a result, never functions as data for understanding nationalism, race, and ethnicity. This style of analysis, in other words, blinds us to understanding ethnicity, historical consciousness, and colonial dilemmas as problems in their own right that need to be explained and for which religious data might provide a wealth of insight.

At its best, then, the study of black ethnic religions constitutes not a quixotic pursuit of "black protest religion" or "hybridity" but, rather more seriously, an analysis of U.S. America as a republic indelibly shaped by slavery whose descendants of ex-slaves developed new

theologies in rejoinder to deep structures of apartheid, alienation, and colonial ideologies of history. (It is perhaps the case that their ethnic claims were significantly responsible for the now familiar and pervasive perspective that assumes African Americans are a cultural and not merely racial demographic.) What emerges, consequently, is an understanding of African American ethnogenesis that targeted the social death induced by American slavery's destruction of genealogical linkages; by erecting religions of heritage, these black ethnics defied the most formidable consequences of slavery that dehumanized African Americans of the early twentieth century. This theoretical insight, in turns, elucidates the *sense* and *meanings* that animated those converts to black ethnic religions, not as mentally unbalanced fanatics, but as complicated subjects who could think and who were as legitimately religious and theologically resourceful as the myriad other Americans located more securely beyond the stain of slavery and alienation.

Notes

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1. Milton Sernett, *Bound for the Promised Land: African American Religion and the Great Migration* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 155; Wallace D. Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915–1952* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 19–22; John Michael Giggie, *After Redemption: Jim Crow and the Transformation of African American Religion in the Delta, 1875–1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 196, 197; James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

2. My spelling of "Itzchok" is based on that used in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*. See "Chicago Has an African Jew," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 6, 1913, G2. Other sources use different spellings.

3. Ibid.

4. "David Itchoch 'Black Rabbi' Is an Imposter," *Chicago Defender*, November 28, 1914 (cited from ProQuest Historical Newspapers, The Chicago Defender [1910–1975], 1).

5. Emanuela Trevisan Semi and others, "Beta Israel," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2d ed., 22 vols., ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 3:503.

6. "The Most Gifted of Africans," *New York Times*, April 19, 1896, 29.

7. I employ *race* throughout this article to denote the discourse of innate, biological difference that has been regarded as the primal cause of putatively natural varieties of human beings. It is clear from current research on genetics that race has no empirical basis in human biology and is thus rightly regarded as an unscientific concept. Although racism is thus rooted in fictitious, perverse claims about "natural" human constitution, it is nevertheless meaningful and forceful because it is rooted in a social construction that has emerged in the wake of relations of power and interests that establish very material, worldly systems of domination (most recently, by self-designated white Europeans over the peoples of Africa, Asia, and the Americas). My use of *ethnicity* reflects my view that it, too, like race, is a discourse in the sense that Michel Foucault identified the nature of sexuality. I am in agreement with Werner Sollors's assessment of ethnicity for this reason. Since its discursive origins in the early twentieth century, *ethnicity* has functioned to signify cultural difference vis-à-vis racial difference. In other words, the idea of ethnicity functioned to unify an amalgam of Europeans (previously conceived as racially, thus biologically, varied) into a single, biologically homogeneous race. As a result, what had earlier been viewed as *racial* difference among multiple European *types* was subsumed under a rubric of *cultural* difference within a single race. The recourse to pre-American heritage served to explain the differences between "white ethnics" and prototypical white Americans despite their being racially identical. "Black ethnics" were attempting to claim heritage by identifying in terms that had been reserved for European immigrants who were acknowledged to have cultural backgrounds that inhibited their assimilation into a "nonethnic," pristinely white American civilization. After World War I, the view that multiple inferior races of Europeans threatened the pristine sanctity of white Anglo-Saxons was gradually yielding to a different consensus—Europeans were racially homogenous and differed only through cultural backgrounds that could be shed through the rigorous work of assimilation. As a result of this trend, white Americans would forget or conveniently ignore the fact that many of them (or their forebears) had been classified as racially (that is, innately biologically) distinct from and inferior to white Anglo-Saxons. Consequently, the chief racial divide would become the black-white binary. Although co-existing with racist distinctions between whites and Asians or whites and Indians, the "Negro question" would typically dominate

legal, cultural, and institutional efforts to police the racial boundaries of American inclusion in the twentieth century. See Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 7–8, 109–110, 246–48; Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); and David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991; repr., New York: Verso, 2007).

8. Werner Sollors, ed., *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), x.

9. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of Races," American Negro Academy, *Occasional Papers*, no. 2 (1897), in *Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1986); W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 1995). Du Bois was also keenly aware that blacks occupied a very problematic location with respect to Americanness, as reflected in his oft-quoted reflection on "double-consciousness" or "two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body." Americanness was constituted through white racial subjectivity. This is why white ethnics could become "simply" white. The very phenomenon of whiteness depended upon the constitution of black subjectivity as its necessary antithesis. Du Bois's most explicit discussion of African cultural influence on slave religion is in his edited *Negro Church* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1903; repr.; Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 4–5. Du Bois is actually the first to argue that religion among enslaved Africans was primarily African, not Christian. Only in the past few decades have the major histories of African American religions taken seriously the capacity of African religions to exert a meaningful influence on North America's religious subjects.

10. Even progressive social scientists like the anthropologist Franz Boaz typically failed to link the peculiarities of African Americans to any substantive notion of African culture, focusing instead on the idea of an ahistorical racial nature or perhaps a biologically based racial essence shaped by environment. See Vernon Williams, *The Social Sciences and Theories of Race* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2006), 26–34. During the Harlem Renaissance era, Zora Neal Hurston and Alain Locke promoted the idea that African Americans embodied a distinctive culture—particularly evident through black folk art and idiom—that was an invaluable contribution to national and world culture. As Locke would emphasize, "civilization is an 'amalgam of cultures,'" among which was that of African Americans. Locke was primarily concerned with the

northern urban context of black culture, whereas Hurston highlighted African American folkways of the South. See Alain Locke, "The Contribution of Race to Culture," in *The Philosophy of Alain Locke: Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*, ed. Leonard Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 59–60; and George Hutchinson, *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 59–60. It is fair to say that Carter G. Woodson was the most effective at institutionalizing the recognition and anamnestic observance of black contributions and culture, especially since he instituted the memoriam of black history during the month of February. Woodson's prodigious research, moreover, and his editorial leadership of the *Journal of Negro History* (currently the *Journal of African American History*) inspired generations of American scholars to engage seriously with the history of blacks as a site of cultural and intellectual significance. He published a history of Africa's major public figures. And in what is perhaps his most famous text, he observed that American history books (of the early twentieth century) denied blacks "a place in the curriculum" and relegated them to the status of a "hewer of wood and drawer of water," mindless bodies without the capacity to form thoughtful contributions to human cultures. Woodson stressed that Africa was key for understanding the identity and distinctive ethos of African Americans, and it was by turning to Africa and its history that the world should come to understand black contributions to world civilization. See Carter G. Woodson, *African Heroes and Heroines* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1939); Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-education of the Negro* (1933; repr., New York: AMS Press, 1972), 21; Andrew P. Smallwood, *An Afrocentric Study of the Intellectual Development, Leadership Praxis, and Pedagogy of Malcolm X* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2001), 24; Tunde Adeleke, *The Case against Afrocentrism* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2009), 80–84; and William G. Martin and Michael O. West, *Out of One, Many Africas: Reconstructing the Study and Meaning of Africa* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999). Exceptions to the trend of ignoring African religions in North America include Katherine Dunham, *The Dances of Haiti: A Study of Their Material Aspect, Organization, Form, and Functions* (n.p., 1938); and Zora Neal Hurston, *Mules and Men* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1935). Both of these anthropologists were contemporaries of Du Bois and Woodson, and they pioneered the study of African-derived religions among Western blacks.

11. Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1963); Ronald Taylor, "Black Ethnicity and the Persistence of Ethnogenesis," *American Journal of Sociology* 84, no. 6 (1979): 1404. Also, see the insightful discussion of Glazer and Moynihan's work

by Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Wings of Ethiopia: Studies in African-American Life and Letters* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990), 30–31. Glazer and Moynihan would issue a second edition of *Beyond the Melting Pot* in 1970 and would repeat this distinction between African Americans and white ethnics as a means of explaining what they perceived to be a gross lack of institutional "self-help" among the former. In addition to the minimal distance between middle-class blacks and the more numerous, impoverished members of the race, these authors opined that the more important barrier to black self-help was that

> the Negro is so much an American, the distinct product of America. He bears no foreign values and culture that he feels the need to guard from the surrounding environment. He insists that the white world deal with his problems because, since he is so much the product of America, they are not *his* problems, but everyone's. Once they become everyone's, perhaps he will see that they are his own, too. (53)

Glazer and Moynihan were influenced by E. Franklin Frazier's thesis that African Americans owed any culture they had strictly to America; Glazer contributed the foreword to Frazier's revised edition of *The Negro Family in the United States*, rev. ed. (1939; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

12. The first programs and departments of black studies would be created in the 1970s and intellectually led by Black Power activists such as Maulana Karenga, who insisted that African culture was absolutely central to interpreting the content of African American identity; Karenga articulated a growing consensus among African American thinkers that being black necessarily meant being African by heritage. In 1977, Alex Haley would produce the popular mini-series *Roots*; Lawrence Levine would publish *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). As Kamari Maxine Clarke has noted, the era was one in which popular American views were characterized by the linkage of race (Diasporic blackness), geography (Africa), and culture (African). See Clarke, *Mapping Yorùbá Networks: Power and Agency in the Making of Transnational Communities* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 116–31.

13. Ronald Taylor, "Black Ethnicity and the Persistence of Ethnogenesis," *American Journal of Sociology* 84, no. 6 (1979): 1401–23.

14. Werner Sollors, "Theory of American Ethnicity, or: '? S Ethnic?/Ti and American/Ti, De or United (W) States S Sl and Theor?'" *American Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1981): 257–83. Sollors's peculiar title to this

article is based on a database search string that he used to locate the numerous articles on ethnicity published in social science journals. For the interface between ideas of ethnicity and those of race, see his "Foreword: Theories of American Ethnicity," in his edited *Theories of Ethnicity*, xiii–xiv . Sollors locates this genealogical approach to ethnicity within the broader analytical shift toward invention as the fundamental means of human agency in construing and constituting social reality.

15. Immanuel Wallerstein, "The Construction of Peoplehood: Racism, Nationalism, Ethnicity," in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, by Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso Press, 1991), 78, 84.

16. A number of factors situated Rabbi Matthew's understanding of Ethiopian Hebrew identity. Most significant was the international attention toward the Falasha Jews of Ethiopia. Also important was the Ethiopian victory against Italian colonialism. The Emperor Haile Selassie embraced the religious implications of his defense against European domination as relevant for the African Diaspora and not merely the nation of Ethiopia. See William R. Scott, *The Sons of Sheba's Race: African-Americans and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–1941* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). Of course, as I discuss below, immigration in the early twentieth century forced the rise of ethnic consciousness among African Americans. White ethnics, on the one hand, were assumed to have history and culture that overlay their Americanness, although this white ethnic identity was not consistently a badge of pride; white immigrants were compelled to assimilate into Anglo-Saxon identity by suppressing or modifying their ethnic "baggage." The point, however, is that they represented their arrival as one equipped with history and cultural accoutrement. Blacks, on the other hand, had to contend with the colonial meanings of black historylessness. In general terms, the dichotomy was one of European culture versus African savagery. Matthew's assertion was a response to this form of antiblackness.

17. See Stephen Haynes, *Noah's Curse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); David Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); and Sylvester Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens, and the People of God* (New York: Palgrave, 2004).

18. Wentworth Matthew's explanation of Ethiopian Hebrew genealogy is reproduced in Milton Sernett, ed., *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, 2d ed. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 473–76. Matthew was not the first to make this claim; Native

American and African authors made the same assertion in the early 1800s. See James W. C. Pennington, *Text Book of the Origin and History, &c. &c. of the Colored People* (Hartford, Conn.: L. Skinner, 1841); and Robert Benjamin Lewis, *Light and Truth, From Ancient and Sacred History* (Augusta, Maine: Severance and Dorr, 1843).

19. The Kebra Nagast is a sacred text of Ethiopian Christianity that relates the descent of Ethiopia's rulers from the ancient Israelite King Solomon.

20. Years earlier, one anonymous writer for the *New York Times* did assert that the Beta Israel Jews were Caucasian and in no way related to the blacks who surrounded them in Africa.

> The experience of the Italians during the past few years with the Abyssinians has shown beyond doubt that these mountaineers of the "Switzerland of Africa" are decidedly a superior race to the other peoples of the Dark Continent with whom the Europeans have come in contact in their colonization and partition schemes. To a great extent their superiority is the result of their origin and pedigree. Although the modern representatives of the Ethiopians of myth and history, they are in reality not Ethiopians at all. They are not black, but are of Caucasian descent as pure as the Anglo-Saxon or the Celt. Language and physiology stamp them as members of the Semitic race, and, consequently, as kindred peoples to the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Arabs, the Syrians, the Jews and other history-making nations of antiquity.

See "The Most Gifted of Africans: The Antiquity, Origin, and Religion of the Abyssinian Race," *New York Times*, April 19, 1896, 29. This was, of course, finely characteristic of how colonial constructions of blackness operated to define any signifiers of culture and history beyond the realm of blackness. It was impossible, in other words, for blacks to be ethnic.

21. "Rabbi Wentworth Matthew, Led Ethiopian Temple Here," *New York Times*, December 5, 1973, 43.

22. The by-laws of the MSTA were divided into "acts" (instead of articles). The sixth act or rubric clearly indicated the theological aim of resituating identity for African Americans as ethnic and not simply racial, stipulating that,

> With us all members must proclaim their nationality and we are teaching our people their nationality and their Divine Creed that they may know that they are a part and a partial of this said government, and know that they are not Negroes, Colored Folks, Black People, or Ethiopians, because these

> names were given to slaves by slave holders in 1779 and lasted until 1865 during the time of slavery, but this is a new era of time now, and all men now must proclaim their free national name to be recognized by the government in which they live and the nations of the earth, this is the reason why Allah the great God of the universe ordained Noble Drew Ali, the prophet to redeem his people from their sinful ways. The Moorish Americans are the descendants of the ancient Moabites who inhabited the North Western and South Western shores of Africa.

This proclamation of a Moorish identity was also incorporated into catechetical literature for MSTA converts. See "Questionnaire and Additional Laws for the Moorish Americans," Moorish Science Temple of America, FBI File 62-25889-6, unnumbered page.

Noble Drew Ali also taught that Jesus was a Moabite and, thus, a member of the Canaanite nation. Part of his basis here was the genealogical claim in Matthew's gospel (1:5) that Jesus' ancestry can be traced to Ruth of the Moabite nation.

23. From the 700s to the 1900s, most European languages employed some form derived from the Spanish *Moros*—*Mauren, Maures, Mauri, Mohren, Moors, Moren, blackamoor, moor, mauro,* or *moro*—to denote Muslim conquerors in the Iberian peninsula and, eventually, to identify blacks throughout Africa (but primarily North Africa) and Europe, but not black Muslims exclusively. The English term *moor,* for instance, was also employed to denote simply Muslims, Berbers, or Syrians. The slippage that lent use of the term to denote "dark" or "black" applied not only to people but also to objects, rendering terms such as "Moorish (black) coffee." See Nelson H. Minnich, "Pastoral Care of Black Africans in Italy," in *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe,* ed. T. F. Earle and K. J. P. Lowe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 282; Philip Butcher, "Othello's Racial Identity," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (1952): 243; and E. Lévi-Provençal, "Moors," *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* new ed., ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

24. See the membership materials of the MSTA, box 1, folder 3, Moorish Science Temple of America Collection, 1926–1967, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York City.

25. C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).

26. See Susan Nance, "Mystery of the Moorish Science Temple: Southern Blacks and American Alternative Spirituality in 1920s Chicago,"

Religion and American Culture 12, no. 2 (2002): 125, 126–27. For instance, Nance repeatedly emphasizes that Ali and many of his followers were poor southern migrants with minimal education, as if this somehow counts as evidence that they could not have possibly been real Muslims. Compare the more sympathetic approaches of Richard Brent Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience*, 2d ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003); and Aminah Beverly McCloud, *African American Islam* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

27. Herbert Berg, *Elijah Muhammad and Islam* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 56–58.

28. Edward Curtis IV, "Why Malcolm X Never Developed an Islamic Approach to Civil Rights," *Religion* 32, no. 3 (2002): 227–42; and his "African-American Islamization Reconsidered: Black History Narratives and Muslim Identity," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 73, no. 3 (September 2005): 659–84. In this latter article, Curtis explains why the locus of religious conversion needs to be resituated from pronouncements of creeds to the formation of identity. Also see his *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002); and his *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam, 1960–1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

29. Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 267.

30. See Howard Brotz, *The Black Jews of Harlem: Negro Nationalism and the Dilemmas of Negro Leadership* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964); Israel J. Gerber, *The Heritage Seekers: American Blacks in Search of Jewish Identity* (Middle Village, N.Y.: Jonathan David Publishers, 1977); and Morris Lounds, *Israel's Black Hebrews: Black Americans in Search of Identity* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981). Among the earliest of these more objective studies was that by A. Paul Hare, whose sociological examination of the Hebrew Israelite Community residing among Israelis employed ethnography to explain *how* this group fashioned identity, authority, gender, and ritual observance to create their version of an ideal society. See Hare, *The Hebrew Israelite Community* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1998). Other representative studies include Yvonne Chireau and Nathaniel Deutsch, eds., *Black Zion: African American Religious Encounters with Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Henry Goldschmidt, *Race and Religion among the Chosen Peoples of Crown Heights* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006); and Martina Kónighofer, *The New Ship*

of Zion: Dynamic Diaspora Dimensions of the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem (London: Lit Verlag, 2008).

31. Chireau and Deutsch, eds., *Black Zion*, 3, 6–7.

32. Roberta Gold, "The Black Jews of Harlem: Representation, Identity, and Race, 1920–1939," *American Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2003): 179–225. See also Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*; Goldschmidt, *Race and Religion among the Chosen Peoples of Crown Heights*; Henry Goldschmidt, "Religion, Reductionism, and the Godly Soul: Lubavitch Hasidic Jewishness and the Limits of Classificatory Thought," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77 (2009): 547–72.

33. See Jacob S. Dorman, "'I Saw You Disappear with My Own Eyes': Hidden Transcripts of New York Black Israelite Bricolage," *Nova Religio* 11, no. 1 (August 2007): 61–83. Dorman's otherwise lucid discussion of "bricolage" among black Israelites is finely characteristic of the problem at hand. Dorman details an interesting and attentive account of Wentworth Matthew and other members of black Judaism, but he centrally employs the idea of "hybridity" and "invention" to render black Jewish religion as uniquely exotic and decidedly other than "real" Judaism. At no point in his discussion does Dorman reckon with the fact that all religions are already hybridized, inventive, and eclectic. And he devotes no attention to the productive work of whiteness to make and authenticate a "normative" Judaism vis-à-vis Judaism among blacks.

34. James E. Landing, *Black Judaism: Story of an American Movement* (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 2002), 13, 70–80, 435–45.

35. The spate of attention toward the challenges within the actual study of religion has been abundant. See Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, Colo.: Davies Group Publishers, 1986); Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on* Sui Generis *Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Tomoko Mazusawa, *Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). Despite this and the robust growth of studies that objectively engage Judaism and Islam among African Americans, there persists a lack of reflexive attention among some recent studies to the problem of reinscribing boundaries of orthodoxy. See, for instance, Landing, *Black Judaism*; Kidd, *Forging of Races*; and Dorman, "I Saw You Disappear with My Own Eyes."

36. Free Africans of New Orleans during the mid-1800s who were Vodun priests described their religion as "African religion" and

evidenced an explicit pride in the fact that they practiced a religion of their African ancestors. See Ina Johanna Fandrich, "Defiant African Sisterhoods: The Voodoo Arrests of the 1850s and 1860s in New Orleans," in *Fragments of Bone: Neo-African Religions in a New World*, ed. Patrick Belle-Garde Smith (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

37. This is among the more disturbing, seemingly bizarre themes in African American Christianity that becomes more explicable in light of the overwhelming status of scientific, historical, and otherwise intellectual claims that associated Africa with decadence during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This African American theodicy interpreted slavery as a divine plan of redemption to deliver blacks into Christendom. The tradition is widely attested in African American Christian writings both during and after slavery. More familiar, perhaps, is Phyllis Wheatley's quip, "'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land/Taught my benighted soul to understand/That there's a God—that there's a Saviour too;/Once I redemption neither sought nor knew." Wheatley expressed not bitterness but gratitude to the Christian deity for being rescued from Africa. It was the nineteenth century, however, that would produce the most frequent and elaborate forms of this ideology. In his rousing speech to foment American support for Christian missions to Africa, Edward W. Blyden urged his black listeners to understand they had been taken from Africa "by permission of Providence, doubtless, that you might be prepared and fitted to return and instruct your brethren." Or, as the African American Episcopal minister Alexander Crummell would describe it, the evangelization of Africa by black Americans had become possible precisely because of the "afflictions and sufferings, and even oppressions" that the black race had endured through slavery and racism. See Phyllis Wheatley, "On Being Brought from Africa to America," in *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley, a Native African and a Slave*, 3d ed. (Miami: Mnemosyne Publishers, 1969), 12; Edward W. Blyden, "Hope for Africa," *Colonization Journal* Tract no. 8 (August 1861): 4; Alexander Crummell, "The Regeneration of Africa," in *African American Religious History*, ed. Sernett, 288. A number of scholars have examined this African American Christian tradition of theodicy. See Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Wings of Ethiopia: Studies in African American Life and Letters* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990), 141–58; Anthony Pinn, *Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 51–53; Tunde Adeleke, *UnAfrican Americans: Nineteenth-Century Black Nationalists and the Civilizing Mission* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998); Walter L. Williams, *Black Americans and the Evangelization of Africa, 1877–1900* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982); and Johnson, *The Myth of Ham*, 75–91.

38. See Edward W. Blyden, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, 2d ed. (1888; repr., Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1994).

39. Circle Seven Koran 46:1–4.

40. Howard Brotz, *The Black Jews of Harlem: Negro Nationalism and the Dilemmas of Negro Leadership* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 34.

41. Ibid., 26.

42. Among the earliest of English comparisons of religions is that by Samuel Purchas, *Purchas His Pilgrimage* (London: William Stansby for Henrie Fetherstone, 1613). Purchas readily assumed and asserted Christian supremacy over all other religions. Christianity, nevertheless, was of a piece, a species within the genus *religio*. Purchas promoted an anthropological view of religion, and he claimed that all religions pursued knowledge and worship of the divine. The myriad influential observers and theorists of religions who would follow are familiar to those acquainted with the historical development of the modern humanistic disciplines—John Spencer, Hannah Adams, Ernest Renan, Friedrich Max Muller, James Frazer, Edward B. Tylor, and Émile Durkheim. Studies that examine the history of observing religion have flourished. Most notable and relevant here are the works of David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996); Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion from Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'The Mystic East'* (New York: Routledge, 1999); and Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

43. See Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 317–24. Masuzawa notes, for instance, that Ernst Troeltsch ably remapped claims to Christian supremacy by assuming that Western Europeans were culturally superior to all other races despite the history of religions turn that ostensibly rendered Christianity as just one of many religions. Because white supremacy was patently manifest in Troeltsch's purview, and because Europeans evidently derived their superlative cultural and intellectual sensibilities from Christianity, racial supremacy, rather than a claim to unique revelation, served as the guarantor of Christianity's elevated status above every other religion.

44. Dictionaries emerged in this period partly to demonstrate the efficacy of vulgar languages in transmitting the ideational currency of scripture, philosophy, intellection, etc. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined*

Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (London: Verso, 1983); Jonathan Sheehan, "Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization: A Review Essay," *American Historical Review* 108, no. 4 (2003): 1061–80.

45. "Questionnaire and Additional Laws for The Moorish Americans," Moorish Science Temple of America, U.S. Department of Justice, FBI File 62-25889-6, unnumbered page.

46. Although I use *cartography* metaphorically here, it is also the case that map-making itself involved the occlusion of Native American and African representations of territories. See Kathleen Biddick, *The Typological Imaginary: Circumcision, Technology, History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

47. James William Johnson, "Chronological Writing: Its Concepts and Development" *History and Theory* 2, no. 2 (1962): 124–45, especially 142–45; David M. Whitford, *The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era: The Bible and the Justifications for Slavery* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 2009); Kidd, *Forging of Races;* Johnson, *The Myth of Ham.*

48. Consider how the Enlightenment rationalism that manifested in the emerging science of Orientalism shattered the supremacy of Hebrew and the Bible as divine sources of authority. These became species of a vast genus, particular examples of scriptural languages and texts in the company of other, more voluminous traditions found in Chinese and Sanskrit. The secularizing forces of expansion, historical confrontation, sympathy with exotic others (*qua* romanticism), and a zeal for classification (of languages, religions, races, sexualities, etc.) functioned to reconstruct the primacy of religion in a different key. Witness, for instance, the path taken by philologists like Silverstre de Sacy and Ernest Renan, who pioneered the discipline. Despite Renan's expressed disdain for religious dogma and creedal pieties, from which he claimed to be liberated by scientific method, he nevertheless refashioned Christianity as the supreme religion of white Europeans by interpreting Jesus as psychologically Aryan. Philology became the respectable means of comparing religions, and Renan's project emerged as one that was deeply theological. See Said, *Orientalism,* 120–40. Generations of white European interpreters continued to employ Enlightenment, rationalist, secular methods to interpret early Christianity and demarcate the bounds of its Jewish and Greek content. By the early twentieth century, in the dominant perspective of white Christian scholarship, Jesus himself had become a white anti-Semite! See J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Shawn Kelley, *Racializing Jesus: Race, Ideology, and the Formation of Modern Biblical Scholarship* (New York: Routledge, 2002);

and Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

49. White Christians in the Americas actually developed new catechisms that were tailored to the task of encoding West African religions as Satanic. African slaves were to recite that the enslaved black priests of Vodun were actually servants of Satan and that honoring the spirits of African revealed religion was devil worship. In a more visceral demonstration of Christianity's racial power to relegate African religion to the shadowy realm of taboo, white Christian slaveholders tortured and publicly murdered Africans who were identified as insurrectionary priests of Orisha religions; their mutilated bodies were left exposed as a visual reminder to other African slaves. See Anthony Pinn, *The Varieties of African American Religious Experience* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 18–19; and Bryan Edwards, "African Religions in Colonial Jamaica," in *African American Religious History*, ed. Sernett, 23.

50. Long, *Significations*, 89–106; Charles H. Long, "Religion, Discourse, and Hermeneutics: New Approaches in the Study of Religion," in *The Next Step in Studying Religion: A Graduate's Guide*, ed. Mathieu E. Courville (New York: Continuum, 2007); Biddick, *The Typological Imaginary*.

51. "Moorish Science Temple of America," U.S. Department of Justice, F.B.I. file 62-25889, Part 1a of 8, Rhea Whitley to Director of F.B.I. [J. Edgar Hoover], memorandum, September 12, 1931, 2, http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/moortemp.htm, accessed June 1, 2007.

52. Ibid., Part 1b of 8, S. Culbertson to D. M. Ladd, memorandum, July 24, 1942, 1, and Part 6c of 8, New Haven, Conn., Field Office to Director of F.B.I. [J. Edgar Hoover], memorandum, August 6, 1952, http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/moortemp.htm, accessed June 1, 2007.

53. "Negro Jews Win Rent Suit," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 23, 1925.

54. Chaim Brovender and others, "Hebrew Language," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Berenbaum and Skolnik, 8: 671.

55. See, for instance, "The Most Gifted of Africans," *New York Times*, April 19, 1896, 29; and "Find Race of Black Jews," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 28, 1902 (cited from ProQuest Historical Newspapers, Chicago Tribune [1849–1986], 1).

56. Wernor Sollors, "Introduction: The Invention of Ethnicity," in his edited *The Invention of Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), xiii–xiv.

57. Vincent L. Wimbush, *African Americans and the Bible;* Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge 1993); Biddick, *The Typological Imaginary;* Long, "Religion, Discourse, and Hermeneutics."

58. The hermeneutical exercise acquires more "refractive" potential, particularly for examining the more auspicious categories of "modernity," when one keeps within historical purview the social milieu of subaltern subjects. See Bhabha, *The Location of Culture,* 236–56.

ABSTRACT During the world war years of the early twentieth century, new African American religious movements emerged that emphasized black heritage identities. Among these were Rabbi Wentworth Arthur Matthew's Congregation of Commandment Keepers (Jewish) and "Noble" Drew Ali's Moorish Science Temple of America (Islamic). Unlike African American religions of the previous century, these religious communities distinctly captured the ethos of ethnicity (cultural heritage) that pervaded American social consciousness at the time. Their central message of salvation asserted that blacks were an ethnic people distinguished not by superficial phenotype but by membership in a heritage that reached far beyond the bounds of American history and geography. The academic study of these religions has largely moved from dismissal and cynicism to serious engagement with African American Jews and Muslims as veritable forms of religion. Despite this progress among scholars, some recent studies continue to *deny* that Matthew's and Ali's communities were authentically Jewish and Islamic (respectively). When scholars dispense with theological or racial biases that bifurcate religions into 'true' and 'false' forms, the study of these black ethnic religions might best yield important insights for understanding the linkage among ethnicity, the nation-state, and religion. The religious reasoning of Matthew and Ali produced resourceful, complicated challenges to dominant colonial and racist paradigms for understanding agency and history. Their theology is appropriately discerned not as illusion, hybridity, or confusion but as thoughtful anticolonial expressions of Judaism and Islam that sought inclusion and honor through black ethnicity. At a time when African Americans were viewed as cultureless and without any legacy of inheritance except the deformities of slavery, the rise of black ethnics introduced religious traditions that demonstrated blacks were indeed a people with heritage.