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Black Jews and the Problem of Ortho-ethnicity

In this paper I will discuss a problem unique to the study of Afro-Jewish communities and their attendant Afro-Judaisms, the problem of *ortho-ethnicity* (proper people). Within the American context there has been a presumption that the categories of “Black” and “Jew” are mutually exclusive racialized categories. Although in contemporary understandings, Jewishness is de-racialized the residue of race-thinking still informs the perception that Blackness and Jewishness are distinct categories. Therefore, the existence of Blacks as Jews presents a conundrum for Afro-Jews in the American experience. Although, the presence of individual Black Jews has been recognized by all American Jewish movements, and the existence of historical communities of African Jews such as the Beta Israel (Ethiopian Jews) has been recognized for centuries by European rabbinical authorities, it is this very act of recognition wherein the problem lies. Recognition is an exercise of authority and power.

For practitioners and scholars of African American religion, questions of orthodoxy (proper belief) and orthopraxy (proper practice) are often leveled at particularistic interpretations of Abrahamic traditions such as Black Liberation theology, and the Nation of Islam, regarding its beliefs and practices. However, with regards to the existence of Afro-Jewish traditions in the United States (and elsewhere), the additional phenomena of *ortho-ethnicity* (proper people) emerges as a response to Blacks as Jews that renders orthodoxy and orthopraxis secondary to what it is considered mainstream Judaism. In essence, the level of ritual observance and adherence to accepted doctrines are of no consequence if the Black as Jew in question is regarded not ritually fit (kosher) according to Jewish law (*halakha*). Therefore, I am arguing that Jewish law (*halakha*) has been racialized and the appearance of Blacks as Jews necessitates a need to authenticate individuals or entire communities on the presumption that Blackness in of itself raises suspicion.

The racialization of European Jews in relation to whiteness has been discussed in works such as Karen Brodtkin’s *How Jews Became White Folks* and Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*. Likewise, the study of the Black-Jewish relationship has operated along a presumption that Blacks in the equation are non-Jews, and the Jews are non-Black thus reinforcing the racial binary. Therefore, the study of Blacks as Jews has received limited attention in how race and religion intersect along the axes of anti-Blackness and antisemitism. I contend that Blacks as Jews experience a unique form of anti-Blackness that also qualifies as a form antisemitism. I call this form of racial debasement anti-Black antisemitism. Born out of the issue of ortho-ethnicity, Blacks as Jews are presumed to be non-Jewish in origin unless legitimated by white rabbinical authorities.

Previously, Afro-Jewish scholars such as Lewis Gordon’s “Rarely Kosher: Studying Jews of Color in North America” and Walter Isaac’s “Locating Afro-American Judaism: A Critique of White Normativity” have identified the complex nature involved in discussing American Jews in

racial terms which have complicated the understanding of non-European Jewish identities and their Judaisms. This paper serves as an intervention into the understanding of Black Judaism as an avenue of Black religious thought and source of black theological reflection. In response to ortho-ethnicity, Afro-Jews have produced a body of scriptural interpretations (*midrashim*) that offer critiques of American Judaism and the presence of anti-Black racism. By studying examples of Afro-Jewish religious thought such as black midrashim, scholars of Afro-Jewish studies will be able to create more sophisticated theological arguments about divine providence, theodicy, and historical consciousness. Therefore, by identifying ortho-ethnicity and anti-Black antisemitism as problems inherent in American Judaism, Afro-Jewish communities are offering critiques of their own racialization which rather than being understood as expressions of antisemitism are nuanced rhetorical counters to systemic exclusion and marginalization.