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## All Yah's Children

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*All Yah's Children:  
Emigrationism, Afrocentrism, and the Place of Israel in Africa*

John L. JACKSON, Jr.

**Résumé :** Cet article évoque l'histoire de l'émigration des « Israélites africains hébreux de Jérusalem », un groupe d'Africains-Américains qui ont quitté les Etats-Unis pour l'Afrique de l'Ouest (puis pour l'Afrique du Nord-Est) à la fin des années 1960. Leur voyage reposait sur une forme de sensibilité afrocentriste, sur un mélange de réponses à l'appel de Marcus Garvey pour une politique centrée sur l'Afrique, et de revendications d'une altérité africaine ontologique. En somme, les mêmes revendications intellectuelles qui commençaient tout juste à être codifiées dans le monde universitaire américain par des académiques comme Molefi Kete Asante. Je soutiens que ces « Israélites africains hébreux » donnent à voir une forme complexe d'Afrocentrisme, une version hébraïcisée qui se conforme à certaines formes canoniques d'Afrocentrisme tout en échappant à d'autres. En outre, leurs conceptions du corps aident à expliquer le manque d'intérêt qu'ils ont suscité dans les discussions plus générales de l'Afrocentrisme et de ses relations historiques et institutionnelles avec d'autres formes de contre-discours afro-centrés.

**Mots-clés :** Afrocentricité, Juifs noirs, émigration, Israël, diaspora raciale.

**Abstract:** This article delineates the emigration story of the "African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem", a group of African Americans who left the United States for West Africa (and then "Northeast Africa") in the late 1960s. Their journey was predicated, I argue, on something similar to an Afrocentric sensibility, a mixture of Marcus Garvey-esque calls for an African-centered politics and claims about an ontological African alterity, the same intellectual claims that were just beginning to get codified in the American academy by scholars such as Molefi Kete Asante. I maintain that these "African Hebrew Israelites" represent a complicated kind of Afrocentrism, a Hebraicized version that does (and does not) conform to certain canonized renditions of Afrocentric thinking. Moreover, their conceptions of "the body" help to further explain their purposeful omission from broader discussions about Afrocentricity and its historical/institutional relationship to other varieties of African-centered counter-discourse.

**Key words:** Afrocentricity, Black Jews, Emigrationism, Israel, Racial Diaspora.

In 1966, amidst race riots and related urban unrest in America's poorest Black neighborhoods, one of Chicago's "native sons", a twenty-something African American named Ben Carter, received a visit from Angel Gabriel anointing him to lead God's people out of the "wilderness" of 1960s America (Hagadol and Israel 1992)<sup>1</sup>. Heeding that celestial call, Carter began to prepare God's flock for a new home in Liberia, a West African nation concocted in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with help from the American Colonization Society (Johnston 1904; Landing 2002; Lounds 1981; Gerber 1977). This mid-1960s emigrationist move to West Africa proved, however, only a temporary sojourn for Carter and his fellow émigrés. That is because Carter, who had already been renamed Ben Ammi (Hebrew for "son of my people") and Nasi Hashalom ("Prince of Peace"), was also part of a larger ethno-political organization (with documented institutionalized precursors throughout the United States as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century) whose members believe that African Americans are actually descendents of the Bible's Ancient Hebrew Israelites (Fausett 1970; Landing 2002; Moses 1998). In this essay, I want to consider the extent to which this "Hebrew Israelite" community's theology, ideology, and transatlantic journey fall within a larger tradition of Afrocentric thought, even as this emigrationist group is usually (and quite decidedly) not thematized as heirs of Afrocentrism in most scholarly or popular accounts<sup>2</sup>.

Afrocentrism often gets attacked from mainstream historical circles for its romantically revisionist racial narratives, its attempts to recast canonized historiography as a purposeful distortion of the historical record in service to "Eurocentric" ideological and political needs. Most of this debate is framed around questions of ancient Egypt's racial composition and organized in terms of the extent to which ancient (read: Black) Egyptian mysteries served as the fundamental building blocks for subsequent Greek philosophies – and, therefore, as the very bedrock for Western civilization (even as Western culture defines its modernist promise and practice in firm opposition to the primitive anteriorities of African culture). Although rarely placed in substantive conversation with these contentious academic and popular debates about Europe's supposed debts to Africa, I want to argue that Ben Ammi and the Hebrew Israelites represent a direct extension of these disputes, rewiring traditional Afrocentric claims to a newfangled reckoning of African Diasporic subjectivity (Gilroy 1993; Edwards 2003).

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- 1 This invocation of "native son" is meant to invoke the Richard Wright (1966) novel about an African American man trapped in the suffocating grasp of a racialized urban America. Moreover, just for clarification, my version of the emigration story owes a great deal to the group's own rendition of their journey. Ben Ammi highlights this celestial visitation as part of his own narrative, actually invoking the Angel Gabriel as his direct interlocutor in 1966. Most academic renditions of the story (Landing 2002, Gerber 1977; Lounds 1981) render the journey's impetus in much more pragmatic, secular, and this-worldly terms. My reference to the "wilderness" is meant to invoke the Biblical tale of God's people wandering through the wilderness. Groups such as the Nation of Islam (and many others) pick up on this same narrative of sacred nomadism.
  - 2 For a useful anthology that offers several accounts, including one that briefly flags links between the Nubian Islamic Hebrews and Afrocentrism, see *Black Zion* (Chireau and Deutsch 2000). My fieldwork among the Hebrew Israelites started while I was still a graduate student of anthropology at Columbia University in 1994. I document the beginnings of that research interest in my second book (Jackson 2005). I have also conducted fieldwork stints in Israel and throughout the United States, the latter constituting most of my sustained ethnographic engagement (including interviews and participant-observation) with the community over the past ten years. I have visited members of the community in Washington D.C., Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Atlanta over the past decade.

Afrocentricity has a canon, and the Hebrew Israelites are usually ignored within that literature. However, they demonstrate a clear debt to larger Afrocentric attempts to make sense of global racial hierarchies, attempts predicated on a systematic critique of the epistemological assumptions that underpin them. I want to challenge commonsensical efforts to omit groups such as the Hebrew Israelites from most renditions and histories of Afrocentrism. With that in mind, I use this essay to unpack some of the parallels between Black Hebrew revisionism and the forms of counter-discourse that Afrocentrists are known to deploy, even as I emphasize the eccentricities that make Hebrew Israelites a difficult group to assimilate into most canonized versions of Afrocentric thought.

Senegalese anthropologist Cheikh Anta Diop's *Civilization or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthropology* (1991) and Chancellor Williams's *The Destruction of Black Civilization* (1987) are both considered classics in the Afrocentric paradigm, providing interpretations of the ancient past that are vastly different from what many regard as "standard" classical history<sup>3</sup>. Williams's book is an ambitious 6000-years saga of racial struggles and skirmishes from ancient Egypt to contemporary Ghana. His point is to make a case for the historical depth of "White Supremacy" and its single-minded attempt at black/African annihilation. Diop dramatizes some of that same history, specifically highlighting the scholastic cover-ups that keep such facts hidden from general audiences. George G. M James's *Stolen Legacy* (1973) is probably the classic among classics in the "Egyptocentric" branch of Afrocentrism, arguing that those thoughtful ancient Greeks weren't so thoughtful after all (i.e., that they actually stole their philosophy from even older Egyptian belief systems). James considers this particularly important because of an equally controversial contention: that those Egyptians of yore were culturally linked to sub-Saharan Africans (and racially "black" by contemporary standards), which is his answer for why European scholars wanted to conceal that part of antiquity's story in the first place. According to James, Aristotle studied under African teachers. He then simply pretended to write the massive volumes found in Alexandria, volumes only there, James contends, thanks to Alexander's plundering of Egypt.

Martin Bernal, a specialist in Chinese political history, revisited and extended this argument in an ambitious multi-part study on the "Afroasiatic roots of Western civilization" (Bernal 1987)<sup>4</sup>. Bernal maintained that an "Ancient Model" for understanding the relationship between Egypt and Greece recognized the latter's debts to the former (just as James contends), but that that position was carefully replaced by an "Aryan Model" more aligned with racist assumptions in the West. Classicists dismissed him as an untrained amateur (Lefkowitz 1996), an illegitimate "armchair archeologist", but many interested scholars still hungrily devour Bernal's critique.

All of these debates are actually somewhat orthogonal to the main academic protagonists and promoters of Afrocentrism, most importantly Molefi Kete Asante. I emphasize Asante for two reasons. First, he is widely considered the most significant academic theorist

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3 In some ways, Black Nationalism and/or Afrocentrism are categorically predicated on race-base suspicions and cynicism vis-à-vis whiteness, which isn't to say that those models lack other forms of pragmatic/theoretical usefulness or intellectual validity. There are powerful critiques of non-rigorous definitions of "Afrocentrism" (Hanchard 2006: 87-97), including those that would mistakenly reduce it to forms of "Egyptocentrism", merely one subset of Afrocentric thinking (Moses 1998).

4 The term Afroasiatic was coined by early 20<sup>th</sup> Century ethnographer and colonialist Maurice Delafosse. The term is meant to invoke a series of related African and Middle Eastern languages/cultures.

and philosopher of Afrocentrism in the United States today. He has framed his entire career around that scholarly intervention. Second, his texts on Afrocentrism constitute undisputed anchor points for the intellectual formation's canonical center. I will briefly describe Asante's description of Afrocentrism and highlight its implicit biases against any political/epistemological investments in Hebrewism before returning to the narrative of the Hebrew Israelites and arguing for their Afrocentric relevance.

### **Afrocentrism 101: The "Place" of Islam**

Philosopher Molefi Asante conceptualizes Afrocentrism as a response to the subjective biases of European thinking and thinkers, biases that he claims are passed off as impartial and objective. Afrocentrism is a corrective to Eurocentrism, which Asante argues is a "situated knowledge" that pretends to be universal and non-contingent. This is an important point to highlight because Asante does *not* argue that Afrocentrism is universal and transcendent. "There is no antiplace" he declares, not even for the Afrocentrist (Asante 1990: 5). Instead, Asante maintains that Afrocentrism is also quite situated, undeniably *placed*. However, it is better situated, Asante argues, from its particular perch to deal with questions about African existence, questions that Eurocentrism's alternative *placeness* can only ever self-interestedly and dehumanizingly answer.

Asante calls attention to the inescapable situatedness of all knowledge production, an Afrocentric version of feminist "standpoint theory", and maintains that Afrocentrism merely highlights a more appropriate place from which to theorize African history, culture and possibility (Harding 2003). According to Asante, centrism is "the groundedness of observation and behavior in one's own historical experiences" (Asante 1990: 12) It does not matter if one is studying the historical record, processes of psychological development, political science or anthropology, Afrocentrism is meant to provide a radically anti-Eurocentric point of entry into any of those domains.

Asante's aforementioned invocation of "historical experiences" is significant, because it justifies his attempt to deploy ancient Africa, especially Egypt (Kemet), as a foundational part of the "origin story" that grounds African difference. Although Asante's first two book-length treatments of Afrocentricity give relatively short shrift to the *place* of ancient Egypt (Asante 1980; Asante 1987), his most exhaustive treatment of the philosophical underpinnings of Afrocentrism (Asante 1990) spends a great deal of time "interpreting the Kemetic record" in an effort to demonstrate the ontological and epistemological difference that the *placedness* of Ancient Africa represents vis-à-vis Eurocentric theorizations of life and death, biology and sociality, political life and its supernatural/divine correlates. If Afrocentrism places Africa at the cultural and ontological center of the African Diaspora, the emphasis on ancient Egypt links that nation's classical history to the center of Africa's civilizational past.

For Asante, African difference is predicated on the radical irreducibility of African (Ma'atic) and European spiritualities. "Ma'at in the Kemetic tradition", Asante writes, "is predicated on our appreciation of the concept of order, measure, limit and form, that is, form in the sense of order and justice" (Asante 1990: 90). It is "the cumulative appearance of the divine properties" (Asante 1990: 88).

Asante goes on to argue, invoking the previously mentioned work of George James, that Greeks subsequently tried to explicitly redeploy (and re-*place*) Ma'at as a basis for their own impoverished (because secularized) notion of mathematics. As far

as Asante is concerned, mathematics is Ma'at with the soul and spirit ripped out of it. Indeed, Afrocentrism is as mystical and soulful as it is empirical, and that is by design. Asante's long forays into the Egyptian mysteries and mythology pivot on the centrality of religiosity and spirituality to any authentic attempt at Afrocentric thought. Asante spends quite a bit of time trying to explicate the constitutive significance of "soul" for the Afrocentric project. It is a "concrete motive force" that "activates research" and grounds the validity and appropriateness of knowledge claims<sup>5</sup>. Asante's commitments to these themes of divinity, spirituality, and soulfulness are key, and they help to explain what he excludes from his conceptualization of African/Kemetic situatedness (as foreign to its fundamental nature) and why.

Near Eastern Studies scholar Sherman Jackson (2005) does a compelling job demonstrating Asante's attempt to disqualify Islam from any fundamental role in rendering Africa's difference from the West. Jackson calls Asante a "Black Orientalist" (borrowing from Edward Said's Foucault-inspired and deconstructionist formulation) for (i) characterizing Muslim societies as intrinsically racist, (ii) casting Islam as just another form of white racism (no better than Christianity on that score), and (iii) defining Islam as categorically alien to his Kemetic Africa. According to Jackson, Asante's "authentic African self" cannot be Muslim (even though, Jackson points out ironically, one of Asante's most-cherished theoretical interlocutors is Muslim, Cheikh Anta Diop). "Adoption of Islam", Asante writes, "is as contradictory to the Diasporan Afrocentricity as Christianity has been" (quoted in Jackson 2005: 109). According to Sherman Jackson, Asante portrays Arab Muslims in Africa as little more than invaders; people who don't naturally belong. If anything, Jackson claims, Asante relegates Arabs and Islam to the role of cancer and poisonous contagion vis-à-vis African life. Their entry into the continent marked the beginning of the end, he says, of Asante's beloved Kemet. "Indeed, [Asante] seems to intimate", Jackson writes, "[that] had it not been for Arab Muslims, the Europeans might have encountered a thriving, powerful civilization in Africa that they would not have been able to dominate" (Jackson 2005: 109).

Jackson believes that Asante falls into this "Orientalist" trap because he projects American racial circumstances onto an African canvas. Ironically, Jackson argues, Asante's Afrocentrism suffers from a kind of Americocentrism. The philosopher's *placement* in America, the *place* of American sensibilities in Asante's conceptualization of Africa, uncritically and unknowingly over-determine his reading of the continent<sup>6</sup>.

In the same way that Asante can condemn Islam for its historical role in the subjugation of African peoples/culture, Judaism and Christianity function as threateningly extrinsic elements with no necessary relationship to African specificity. In such a philosophical context, one wherein ancient Egypt is privileged and Judaism is little more than potentially complicit in clearing ground for trans-Atlantic slavery's ideological justifications and practical machineries, the Black Hebrew Israelites represent a radically different articulation of this ongoing attempt to resignify Africa as more than just Europe's dark

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5 There is a productive tension between Asante's commitments to situated knowledge and his unpacking of an African case/*place* that can also traffic in seemingly ethereal and universalist concepts of transcendent and *sui generis* spiritualities.

6 As one of this piece's reviewers emphasizes, Asante's hostility to Islam is a function of his attempt to distinguish Afrocentrism's political and national project from the revisionist efforts of African American groups such as the Nation of Islam.

lack. However, given his dismissal of Islam, Asante would not fully approve of the Hebrew Israelites' reclamations of Africa, especially insofar as it pivots on a constitutive inclusion of Israel into the formulation. Moreover, given the complicated historical connections and conflicts between African Americans and Ashkenazi Jews, conflicts fanned by the flames of anti-Semitic comments from groups such as the Nation of Islam, Asante is also negotiating a political landscape that already presupposes serious African American skepticism vis-à-vis the Jewish community (Berman 1994). Of course, all of this coincides with the substantive philosophical and historical links between Judaism/Jewry and Afrocentrism. For instance, early 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish American anthropologists such as Franz Boas and Melville Herskovits were quite valuable to Afrocentrists in terms of providing evidence for claims of West African cultural unities and continuities with the African Diaspora (Herskovits 1990; Moses 1998). Moreover, the earliest practitioners of Black Freemasonry in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a group considered central to discussions about longstanding African American investments in the symbolic significance of ancient Egypt, actually identified with ancient Hebrews more than ancient Egyptians (Grimshaw 1903; Moses 1998), a move that anticipated Ben Ammi's identitarian claims by some 200 years.

### Life in Liberia

Ammi took up to 400 people with him to rural Liberia in 1967, far from the capital city of Monrovia. However, by 1968, almost three-quarters of those migrants had returned to the United States, unable and unwilling to hazard the physical and mental hardships of "bare life" in the Liberian jungle – beyond the bounds of the nation-state, left to fend for themselves on the outskirts of that nation's legitimate body politic (Agamben 1998). Many of these African Americans were born in urban cities like Chicago, Detroit, Ohio, New York, and Atlanta, which means that they did not know the first thing about building their own homes from scratch, cooking food *sans* four-burner stoves, or preserving meat and other items without the comfort of reliable, electric refrigeration – all things they needed to perfect on the people-less, tree-filled land they occupied in Liberia (Gerber 1977; Hagadol and Israel 1992; Landing 2002)<sup>7</sup>.

When these African-American Hebrew Israelites left the United States, they were not necessarily lauded by everyone as valuable ideological and institutional progeny of the still-lionized Marcus Garvey and his early 20<sup>th</sup> century Black-Star Lined plot to relocate race-mates to The Continent. Instead, some people saw them as sellouts, cowards, and apolitical freaks. Everyone else was digging in their heels to fight, the rhetorical backing of "Black Power" as wind in their activist sails, and these Black Israelites were leaving the country. They were also following a young twenty-something former foundry worker, Ammi, who was specifically told (by many of the elders in Chicago's eclectic Black Hebrew Israelite community) that the time was not yet right for such a journey – or, according to some, that such a relocation scheme should never be undertaken at all. But Ammi's group emigrated anyway, which means that they were questioned both for avoiding the Black-Power fight in the land of their birth and for disobeying the decrees

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7 The Liberian Constitution didn't allow non-citizens to own land, and there was a long residency period before new arrivals qualified. So, since only citizens could legally own land, the Hebrew Israelites had to give their money to a Liberian citizen who purchased the land they used for them (and technically owned it), which only made the community feel that much more vulnerable.

of leaders in the Black Hebrew Israelite community they left behind in Chicago. To make matters worse, early life in Liberia was considerably more difficult than some of the émigrés had anticipated. The Liberian government, headed by powerful Americo-Liberian descendants of 19<sup>th</sup> century slaves from the United States, agreed to allow Ammi's group to enter their country, a decision predicated on Liberia's historical role as an early settlement for America's free Black population (Gerber 1977; Akpan 1973).

Once Ammi's group arrived in Liberia and the novelty of their emigrationist success wore off, the truly daunting nature of their ongoing task became increasingly clear. Some of the early migrants died of diseases, snake bites, and physical accidents (such as falling down open wells). The community did not have a great deal of money, could not grow enough food, and lived about 100 miles from Monrovia's stores and urban amenities. All of these variables conspired to make the group's stint in Liberia quite harrowing, and Ammi's emigrationist experiment seemed doomed to fail by spring of 1968. However, God sent another sign to his messenger.

In April of that year, Martin Luther King, Jr., gave a rousing speech in Memphis during what would turn out to be his final public appearance, just one day before he was killed on the balcony of a Tennessee hotel room. In the now-famous speech, one King had given several times before, he offered up his own spiritually-inspired dream, one that resonated with this small community of American ex-pats barely surviving in Guryea, Liberia: "I just want to do God's will", King preached. "And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the Promised Land". Hearing these words, a group of seemingly separatist Black expats invoked an assimilationist Civil Rights icon to justify their next major decision.

Hearing this inspiring and Amen-accented declaration from the news reports they listened to in Liberia, Ben Ammi interpreted King's last public statement as prophecy – as another bit of divine intervention<sup>8</sup>. Why did God put those particular words in King's mouth on that fateful day? Was not the "Promised Land" Israel, especially for African Americans claiming to be descendants of ancient Hebrew Israelites? If so, what were they doing in West Africa? Of course, they could not survive there; some of them would get disillusioned and head back to America. Liberia was not where their Diasporic origin story began. So in 1969, the remaining 100 African-American Hebrew Israelites emigrated again – this time, from West Africa to the modern state of Israel.

One thing that is important to highlight, however, is that the group does not consider itself to have left Africa as a function of that move. In fact, they have re-geographized Israel as little more than a subsection of the African continent, "Northeastern Africa", and decidedly not a segment of the "Middle East", the latter being considered a kind of conspiratorial fiction used to buttress attempts to excise Israel from commonsensical cartographies of Africa. Of course, forms of Black Nationalism have long drawn on the Middle East, specifically Islam and Judaism, as "cultural anchor" (Moses 1998) and metaphorical inspiration. One of the nineteenth century's "fathers" of Afrocentrism,

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8 According to at least one researcher (Gerber 1977), the group's decision to leave Liberia for Israel was much more of a practical and calculated response to the empirical failures of their tenure in Liberia. The community maintains that they actually always intended their sojourn in Liberia to be temporary, a quick stop on the way to Israel. The King speech just reminded them of that fact. Most historians of the group seem to argue that talk of Israel only began once life in Liberia proved untenable.



Edward Wilmot Blyden was clearly inspired by early childhood experiences with the local Jewish community in St. Thomas and even studied Hebrew with local Jewish intellectuals (Gilroy 1993; Moses 1998). The Nation of Islam's religiously inflected nationalist project is an obvious example of Islam's deployment as a kind of racio-religious project (Curtis 2002; Rouse 2004; Jackson 2005). And Marcus Garvey's envious assessments of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish Zionism are well known (Gilroy 1993; Grant 2008). Moreover, Asante's commitments to Ancient Egypt (at the expense of a delegitimized Islam) parallel African Hebrew Israelites' recuperations of Israel as Africa, recuperations that displace Egypt as the symbolic center of African cultural difference. Where the Egyptophilic version of the Afrocentric debate links ancient Egypt/Kemet (genealogically, culturally, spiritually, politically and symbolically) with sub-Saharan Africa, the Black Hebrew Israelites connect Israel to Africa, which they would describe as a *reconnection* and geographical correction. The group's iconic pictorial representations of the African continent include a tiny sliver extending from the upper right corner of the image, which helps them to highlight their argument about Israelite refugees populating every section of Africa after Romans destroyed the temple (70 AD) and forced the Israelite tribes to flee. Israel is right in Africa, they argue, so it stands to reason that the tribes would have fled farther into that same continent as opposed to just heading north.

In many ways, the Hebrew Israelites represent an alternative *re-placing* of Africa to the kind found in Asante's rendition of Afrocentrism, but it is no less predicated on Africa's centrality. The interior of Africa not only rests beneath Israel, it houses many different manifestations of Hebraic practices and beliefs. The community has even mounted a traveling museum that documents all the tribal rituals in eastern, western, southern and central Africa that demonstrate ostensibly Hebraic traditions extant among a vast number of African groups.

Not knowing quite what was happening when Ben Ammi and his compatriots arrived in 1969 (or how to respond to their genealogical claims about being "lost tribes"), the Israeli government grudgingly allowed some of the earliest arrivals to exit Ben Gurion International Airport and enter the country temporarily on visitors' visas (Gerber 1977), and these African American Hebrew Israelites have been there ever since. By the summer of 2005, the first time I visited them in their quaint and quiet enclaves in Dimona, Arad and Mitzpe Ramon, in Israel's Negev region, I was surprised to find that the initial 100 émigrés had ballooned to about 3 000, and that these African American immigrants who invoke the "Right of Return" to justify their presence in the Holy Land have established themselves as a recognizable segment of contemporary Israel's multicultural landscape.

The group has become a little-known (and under-studied) satellite of Black America, an intentional community, what Anthony Wallace would have called a "revitalization movement", one that lives on its own relatively self-contained village compound (Wallace 1956). Dimona, their capital city, is a converted immigrant absorption center, and *saints*, as members are called, reside there and throughout Israel, from the southernmost town of Eilat to the northern cities around the Sea of Galilee. And there are many more *saints* in small communities all around the world, particularly throughout the United States.

This group has a complicated relationship to the Middle East: one-part Jewish-identification through their professed Israelite genealogy, and one-part Palestinian sympathizing as a function of their own marginalized status in what they would describe as a "racist" nation-state. Of course, the latter is operative even while their "settler" practices

prove problematic in the context of competing Palestinian claims to autochthonous belonging.

Looking at this from an even broader conceptual canvas, their story provides some perspective from which to make sense of conflicted American responses to the contemporary global moment, especially since these African-American Hebrew Israelites are hybrid citizens, invested in Israel (with their high school graduates, for the first time two years ago, voluntarily enrolled in the Israeli army), but still irredeemably connected to American society through friends, family members, an internationally successful vegan restaurant chain with branches all over the United States, and members' own individual life histories (Markowitz and Stefansson 2004)<sup>9</sup>. With that as backdrop, the group's emigrationist story can also help to problematize conventional assumptions about racial identities and Diasporic communities, placing theoretical and historical treatments of Jewish Diasporic longings and African Diasporic desires into a robust and critical conversation. Scholarship on the "African Diaspora" or the "Black Atlantic" (in anthropology, literature, history and philosophy) can sometimes merely gesture towards the general debts owed to Jewish conceptualizations of Diaspora without substantively unpacking the implications of that analytical and interpretive indebtedness<sup>10</sup>. If Afrocentric scholarship actually pivots on deconstructionist assumptions about historical inaccuracies promulgated by Western science, letters, and history at the expense of African Diasporic subjects, a serious ethnographic appreciation of the African Hebrew Israelites allows us to examine a similar deconstructionist project operationalized as a full-fledged social movement.

### **The Many Bodies of Black Hebrewism**

The Black Hebrew Israelites who arrived in Israel in 1969 had come out of urban American cities such as Detroit, Cleveland, Washington D.C., and Chicago. They were from working class and lower middle class families, and some had been Pentecostals, Baptists and even Black Muslims before accepting the truth of their status as descendents of Ancient Hebrew Israelites. A few of the *saints* were successful R&B recording artists before they left the United States, and they immediately formed a band that toured Liberia, Israel and Europe to help raise money for the resettled community. Ben Ammi was (and still is) the group's spiritual leader and messiah, but he formed a governing body of princes and minister quite early on, and these individuals, all men, would become increasingly responsible for the daily operations of the community<sup>11</sup>.

Their lives in Israel during the 1970s and 1980s were fraught and vulnerable, allegedly replete with million-dollar money-laundering rings and airline ticket fraud operations set up to finance members' clandestine return to Israel whenever they were periodically

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9 There are many subtle implications of Hebrews Israelites' conceptions of political difference (Markowitz, Helman, and Shir-Vertesh 2003).

10 Anthropologists are engaged in quite ambitious re-articulations of a transatlantic narrative of black racial re-imagining (Matory 2005; Clarke and Thomas 2006; Clarke 2004).

11 There are twelve princes and many more ministers who run the ministries (of transportation, education, information, etc.). The third level of leadership is the "Crowned Brothers and Sisters", and many of the crowned sisters are responsible for major aspects of the community's development and public image (Markowitz 2003).

rounded up and deported by the Israeli state<sup>12</sup>. The community has come a long way since then, which is partially evidenced in their ability to construct a relatively new multi-million dollar school building facilitated (and partially financed) by the United States (even after group members publicly renounced their US citizenship in the 1980s). Moreover, there is also much to be said about their own impressive and ambitious development projects throughout West Africa, in places such as Benin, Senegal, and Ghana. However, I want to hint at their conceptualizations and politicizations of the human body itself (and concomitant notions of personhood) as a way to think about how such deployments frame their collective attempt to wire race and spirituality to a re-imagined national community.

There are many points of entry into the group's mobilizations of what might be called "bodied rhetorics". For instance, there is a complex calculus that determines which bodies are even "Black Hebrew Israelite" bodies in the first place. A different offshoot of the Black Hebrew Israelite community in the United States, the "Worldwide Truthful Understanding" (WTU) Black Hebrew Israelites in New York City, transformed their members from strict genealogists (reading either matrilineality or patrilineality as the indisputable basis for authentic Israelite belonging) to advocates of an adamant anti-genealogic – claiming that the real prerequisite for belonging was not a Black mother or Father, or any epidermal evidence of Blackness at all, only the capacity to hear and accept "Yah's message", regardless of a person's social background, family tree, and phenotypical features (Jackson 2005). That transformation, which took place at the end of the 1990s, was a fairly radical recalibration, a re-reckoning of identity for the once-in-a-lifetime *fin de siècle*. Where previously the WTU Black Hebrews could definitively proffer a precisely racial and genealogical organizing principle for inclusion and exclusion, they subsequently conceded to a version of social collectivity that ostensibly eschewed any explicit adjudication based on racial logics. The change was predicated on the group's re-reading of the Bible (including Titus 3:9), which warns Israelites to avoid "foolish questions, and genealogies". In many ways, that move from genealogy to anti-genealogy already expresses two very direct (even mutually exclusive) ways in which some Black Hebrew Israelites addressed a notion of "the body" and its implications for group belonging. In the first instance, the body's very history and materiality determined legitimacy. In the second, bodies are deemed unreadable and spiritually unintelligible except as a function of their performances of faith and acceptance.

The WTU Hebrew Israelites share some institutional history with Ammi's Hebrew Israelites now in Israel, but the two groups' current ideologies and cosmologies are quite different. Indeed, there are several disparate Black Hebrewisms today, all interconnected (in some ways) but distinct. For instance, some of the earliest institutionalized African American identifications with Judaism date back to the eighteenth century and the beginnings of the nineteenth century. William Christian founded one of the first self-professed Black Jewish congregations in the latter half of the nineteenth. In the early 1900s, Prophet Cherry and William Crowdy started what many historians characterize as "Black Jewish" worship services, the Church of God, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and

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12 Having only "temporary visas" (if particular members had visas at all) meant that Black Hebrew Israelites couldn't work legally in Israel. Therefore, they often worked off the books. For instance, they would go out and secretly build homes for nomadic African Bedouin forced into sedentary living by a census-taking and tax-collecting Israeli state. The men would sometimes get rounded up and deported while they were out on such jobs.

The Church of God and Saints in Christ of Lawrence, Kansas, respectively (Brotz 1964; Fausett 1970). Appealing to the metaphorical resonances between American slavery and ancient Israelite captivity, these groups made a compelling case for the parallels between Jewish bondage in Egypt and African bondage in America. These early Jewish hubs in Philadelphia and Kansas extended outward to the north and west as congregants and ministers traveled far and wide with their syncretic Judaic teachings.

Jamaican Rastafarianism is also often associated with this diffusionist impulse in stories of Black Jewry, especially as a function of its Jewish iconography, most conspicuously the group's ubiquitous Star of David and invocations of Jah/Yah (Landing 2002). The Nation of Yahweh in Florida is a Black Jewish group infamous for its links to crime and corruption, whose leader, Yahweh Ben Yahweh, is serving time in a Pennsylvania penitentiary (Freedberg 1994). Another group, the Law Keepers, is a Torah-based organization that spells its self-designation with a capital Y, Yisraelites, meant to orthographically invoke the Hebrew language, and that practices its own distinctive form of Hebrewism. Indeed, even the distinction between Israelite and Jew is significant. Black *Jews* are usually meant to refer to those African Americans who look to established Jewry (and to the religion of Judaism) for guidance and validation. Black *Israelites* define themselves against traditional forms of Judaism (including rabbinical extrapolations on the Old Testament), and they usually dismiss the designation *Jew* as a reference to only a single tribe (the tribe of Judah) as opposed to all twelve tribes of the Israel.

Most famously, the Commandment Keepers of Harlem, a group of Black Jews ethnographically canonized in the 1960s (Brotz 1964; Landes 1967), were led in the early 1900s by Rabbi Arthur Wentworth Matthew, a black man believed to have come out of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, along with Rabbi Josiah Ford, the UNIA's choir leader, a person that anthropologist Howard Brotz theorizes might have been the same Ford/Fard that started the Nation of Islam in Detroit a few years after Rabbi Ford was said to have left for Africa. The Commandment Keepers are usually considered Black Jews (instead of Black Israelites) because Matthew let white Jews visit his services and even consulted with them on Jewish practices and rituals, something the WTU Hebrew Israelites would never imagine doing.

Presently, Commandment Keepers all across America are carefully codifying and archiving the history of their particular Black Jewish organization, and part of that project entails making it absolutely clear how their brand of Judaism differs from the practices of the WTU Hebrew Israelites, a group that meets not more than five blocks from the Commandment Keepers' Harlem synagogue. Making this distinction explicit is important because the WTU Black Hebrews are decidedly vocal about their disdain for whites/Europeans, a hatred rooted in racialized readings of Genesis that interpret Rebekah's birthing of twin boys (Esau and Jacob) as the origin story for two discrete races (blacks and whites). According to the WTU Hebrew Israelites, contemporary Jews are "imposters" purposefully hiding the truth about African Americans' genealogical links to the ancient Israelite patriarchs<sup>13</sup>. Indeed, these current claims about "imposter Jews" demonstrate a clear indication of the overlap between WTU Hebrew Israelite beliefs and those found

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13 According to some Black Hebrew Israelite communities, Esau's offspring (the Edomites) are currently passing themselves off as Israelites (descendants of Esau's brother, Jacob). Moreover, it is important to remember that both Esau and Jacob, Edomites and Israelites, are considered Hebrews, which is why the designation "Israelite" is an important specification.

among the distinct group of Hebrew Israelites that entered Israel with Ammi, overlaps that have become starker divergences in the forty years since Ammi's group first took up residence in Israel. After being disqualified from citizenship under the 1952 Law of Return, the group responded by de-authenticating the Jews who were already residing in Israel (i.e., calling them imposters and frauds). Up through the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Hebrew Israelites in Dimona dismissed European Israelis' claims to Jewishness quite emphatically. They also critiqued those Ethiopian Jews who were willing to symbolically convert after being airlifted to Israel in the 1980s, a precedent often cited by government officials as justification for making the same request of the Black Hebrew Israelites from Chicago (Gerber 1977). Today, the Hebrew Israelites in Dimona no longer voice a categorical denial of European Jewry's legitimacy, but the WTU Hebrew Israelites in Harlem and Brooklyn still espouse that position, even as they no longer test initiates' biological/genealogical authenticity through an examination of patrilineality.

This slow divergence is not the only thing that distinguishes Ammi's Hebrew Israelite community from the WTU Hebrews. Unlike Ammi's group, which considers Israel a part of Africa and calls itself the "*African Hebrews of Jerusalem*", the WTU Hebrews define Black Hebrew Israelites in contradistinction to Africanity – with Africans deemed different peoples entirely: Hamites, Hagerenes, Cushites, and Ishmaelites, but not Israelites. The WTU Black Hebrews invoke a Hebrew Israelite Diaspora that is a kind of "racial Diaspora" but without any recourse to Africa at all<sup>14</sup>. African alterity is absolute and immutable, regardless of the superficial phenotypical sameness of skin-color. Of course, this kind of conflicted (even hostile) assessment of African difference has defined African-American understandings of the "motherland" for centuries, especially as filtered through the prism of religion. For instance, Christianity's offer of salvation helped to justify many nineteenth century African-American missionaries' "redemptionist" demonizations of African spiritual beliefs (Campbell 2006; Moses 1998). However, unlike the WTU Hebrew Israelites, Ammi's Hebrew Israelites turn the African Diaspora into a proxy for a form of Black Diasporic subjectivity that is African and Israelite in the selfsame instant. Where one of these two contemporary Black Hebrew Israelite groups (which share the same splintered historical lineage to those 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> Black Jewish institutions in Kansas, Philadelphia, and New York City) defines Africans as external to Israelite identity (regardless of commonsensical assumptions about somatic similarities and historical contiguities) and as excluded from any valid definition of a Black Hebrew Israelite Diaspora (which is not in any way, then, an *African Diaspora*), the other group, the one residing in Israel today, makes Israelite identity inextricably connected to a larger African genealogical, geographical, and cultural landscape<sup>15</sup>.

Of course, the Hebrew Israelites currently residing in Israel might consider Africans to be legitimate descendents of the ancient Israelite tribes, but their unacceptable (because non-Israelite) African religious beliefs and practices are another matter. Moreover, the

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14 This actually performs the same move that Sherman Jackson attributes to Asante's Afrocentrism vis-à-vis seemingly foreign religions, only in reverse.

15 Of course, a different scale of embodiment, from the "biopolitical" to what Paul Gilroy (2000) and others label the "nanopolitical", has always served as one of the most foundational justifications for claims of Jewish/Hebrew authenticity. That includes genetic research on the Y-chromosomes of the Lemba peoples from Southern Africa as well as more recent (and popularized) deployments of genetics as the final adjudicator of all Jewish belonging (Entine 2007; Thomas et al. 2000).

Black Hebrew Israelites' explicitly invoke "culture" (as a label for what their revisionist project entails) at the expense of discourses about religious affiliation of any kind. The Black Hebrew Israelites declare, in no uncertain terms, that they do not practice a religion. Their beliefs exemplify a cultural worldview, they argue, a holistic lifestyle. And they specifically call it a "lifestyle", a culture, not a religion. Religion is the problem, AviMelech once told me during a trip we took to visit some Bedouin outside of the town of Beer-sheva.

AviMelech describes himself as a "Divine Guide and Hermeneutic Scholar", someone who studied with one of the group's most famous priests, Prince Shaleak Ben Yehuda, throughout the 1980s and 90s. We were driving through the nearby city of Rahat as he periodically pointed his index finger out the window of the air-conditioned mini-van and into the hot sun, directing my attention to people walking the streets who "look like Pookie and Rae-Rae and Big Earl and all those folks you know from back home". AviMelech relishes the opportunity show new American visitors "the African presence in Israel" – a reality, he says, which never gets represented on CNN. However, that does not mean Black Hebrew Israelites in Dimona are sympathetic to the Africans' religious beliefs. *Saints* maintain that Christianity, Islam and Judaism actually cause all the problems in the world, especially the violent conflicts in the Middle East. At the same time, they make a clear distinction between their lifestyle practices and others' religious doctrines<sup>16</sup>. Indeed, whether they are defining themselves in opposition to African cultural groups (as the WTU Black Hebrews do) or considering themselves part of a larger African cultural worldview (with Israel defined as Africa's northeastern tip), Black Hebrew Israelites highlight their own cultural distinctiveness as the organizing principle for grander claims about their embodied difference. They privilege a nationality of alterity over and against Euro-religions and their claims of monopolistic access to true divinity. The Hebrew Israelites' commitments to Yah are about ancestry, they argue, not the impoverished and compartmentalized sense of spirituality institutionalized as formal religious denominations<sup>17</sup>.

### **Bodies That Matter**

In any discussion of Israelites and their bodies, it might also make sense to invoke the case of the Dimona Black Hebrew Israelites' first victim of terrorism, a young musician killed by a suicide bomber while playing with a band on the Northwest coast. Israeli sympathy poured out for the community as a function of the incident, members claim,

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16 The group has a complicated racial logic. They are both post-racial (as evinced in what a colleague of mine, Charlie Piot, has called their Pentecostelization of belonging, which I have already described above) and decidedly not post-racial at all-African Bedouins' epidermal blackness is a point of identification even as they move to a more all-inclusive and race-neutral definition of Israelite identity that allows for the idea that ancient tribes were dispersed to the south (i.e., the rest of Africa) and the north (Europe) after the destruction of the Temple in 70AD.

17 It is also important to note that the Hebrew Israelites in Dimona read the Transatlantic Slave Trade as a fulfillment of divine prophesy and Yah's justified response for ancient Israelites breaking their covenant with Him. In some ways, this reading reduces Europeans to pawns in a larger Providential game, which might be read as either letting European colonialism off the hook or, alternatively, humbling the world-historical hubris of European imperialists/expansionists and their sense of cultural might.

and it served as the beginning of a more robust acceptance from the Israeli state<sup>18</sup>. They were made to feel less foreign as a function of this tragedy, and it served as a mechanism for facilitating their further acceptance as a part of the Israeli nation, an acceptance manifested in their recently achieved status as “permanent residents”, the penultimate step along a path to the citizenship that they have been demanding since 1969. In this instance, the body, even and especially the deceased body, has productive force as a thematized and politicized fixation<sup>19</sup>. This discussion of death, of the dead body, is key, and I want to use its invocation as the suggestive scaffolding for a different examination of the Black Hebraic definitions/operationalizations of “the body” as a politicized form of materiality and performativity in the selfsame instance, operationalizations that serve to further marginalize the group in discussions of Afrocentric theorizing.

To get at this one last deployment of “the body”, let me continue, as anthropologists are wont to do, with the invocation of a public ceremony. In 2006, during the group’s New World Passover festival (an Easter-time affair commemorating their 1967 journey from the United States), the community spent several days putting on theatrical productions that narrated their story, emphasizing (even lampooning) the fact that Ben Ammi, their messiah, heard his message from Angel Gabriel and did not initially know how to respond. The Hebrew Israelite community’s “Ministry of Information” videotaped the performances, which included young teen and twenty-something *saints* playing the roles of Angel Gabriel, Ben Ammi, and his childhood friend Gavriel Ben Yehuda.

During one skit, an elderly Ben Ammi is smiling and enjoying the dramatic re-enactments under the bright Israeli sun. With several princes and ministers, the male authorities in the community, sitting by Ammi’s side, the young people perform the visitation of Angel Gabriel in the middle of the village’s parking lot, carefully transformed into a “theater in the round” for the week-long festivities. The young Ben Ammi is first startled by the voice. He doesn’t quite believe it. At first, he thinks he is just going insane, and only grudgingly begins to heed the call – cautious, doubtful, and hesitant all the while. The entire performance is done almost like a kind of spoof, with the saints laughing to themselves at how crazy this all must sound to the outside world. They were putting this theatrical performance on specifically for themselves, with *saints* from all over Israel, Europe, the United States, the Caribbean and Africa returning for this popular annual

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18 The community always makes a distinction between the mostly cool treatment that they believe they have historically received from the Israeli government and the warm acceptance that they say characterizes the response of Israeli residents themselves.

19 You don’t have to be an anthropologist to argue that there is no such thing as a “natural death”, at least not for critics interested in discovering what we “do” with the dead – how we embalm them for ritualized resurrection. Death has obviously inescapable cultural trappings (Green 2008). For instance, there are also the arguments that Black Hebrew Israelites in Israel deployed in the 1980s, arguments about their racialized marginalization and “social death” (Patterson 1985) as evidenced in the group’s vocal claims that the Israeli state would not even provide them with a proper cemetery in which to bury their dead. Instead, and quite infamously, they were said to dispose of those bodies in a nearby toxic waste dump. And this was one of the tragedies, some members say, that finally compelled (really shamed) state institutions into helping them, forcing a ratcheting up of assistance from Israel and the United States: members of the Congressional Black Caucus were supposedly moved by such narratives, and, on the Israeli side, the Black Hebrews laud a friendly Sephardic mayor willing to assist them on such matters in ways that Ashkenazi elected officials supposedly never had before.

event. And they were highlighting the odd form of spiritualized disembodiment that prompted their transcontinental journey.

This sense of self-mockery, their self-conscious recognition of how odd and peculiar they must look to the outside world, is one of the group's most amazingly powerful traits – a cognizance that informs every decision they make about how to frame their efforts for external consumption. Their Internet Radio Station and community-produced video/film archival efforts show a subtle understanding of their complex relationship to Afro-America more generally. Indeed, it is complicated by the fact that they espouse a vernacularized version of the infamous “culture of poverty” argument emphasizing African American pathology. Black culture, in its American context, the culture these Hebrew Israelites left behind in the 1960s, perpetuates Black dysfunction in every way – in music, most recently instantiated by hip-hop, through religious services, family structure, anti-intellectualism and underachievement. However, there is one major wrinkle to their iteration of this “culture of poverty” critique that continues to serve as justification for their post-emigrationist endeavors: Black culture is pathological in the United States because American culture, writ large, is the apogee of cultural pathology. According to the Hebrews Israelites, this is not about Black American exceptionalism. It is a function of God's people not making themselves exceptional, about their too-easy acceptance of destructive American perspectives. Again, this is a move similar to the kind that animates Afrocentrism: a critique of Black cultural practices/assumptions as a function of American (i.e., Western, European) “miseducation” and assimilation (Woodson 1990).

“We [Black Americans] like eating ham hocks and chitlins and whatever else they use to kill us”, Ahmadiel Ben Yehuda, a community minister, offered up during a late-night discussion at the group's guest house during one of my visits in 2007. “It took us [the African Hebrews of Jerusalem] time to get where we are now, to really understand the power of divine eating”, a codified response to decidedly dysfunctional African American dietary practices.

### **Divine Eating**

Within a few days of my 2007 arrival in Dimona, I met Oriyahu, a nineteen year-old Black Hebrew Israelite who was born and raised in Israel. Oriyahu was the community's first and only military inductee the year before, the community's attempt to demonstrate its commitment to the Israeli state and its appreciation of a newly conferred “permanent residency” status for its members. On furlough for a portion of the summer when we met, Oriyahu sported a mandatory buzz cut, which made him the first and only Dimona member with a bald head (because he had to shave it upon entry into the Israeli military). In a version of their own Hebraic orthodoxy, *saints* believe that God outlaws the shaving of facial hair. However, with their new military service, the children of this close-knit and insular community will be integrated into the larger Israeli society like never before, which might potentially create problems for the group and its ability to enforce their rules, especially those about health: including that aforementioned anti-shaving regulation, a community mandate to wear all-natural clothes (military uniforms being made of both natural and synthetic fabrics), their no-salt mandate (every other day), and their strict veganism (which I will discuss a bit more in a moment). One serious question that the community must address has to do with whether or not they can even reproduce another generation of *saints* without being able to monitor their young adults as stringently as



they have in the past. This newly instituted military service might potentially threaten social reproduction, especially when the community is predicated on a strict division between insiders and the outside world. Given such newfangled porousness between young adults and the larger Israeli community, will the Hebrew Israelites continue to be successful in the Negev desert? And make no mistake about it; the group can boast some amazing successes, especially in the area of health and nutrition.

At the end of the 1990s, a team of American physicians from Vanderbilt University and Meharry Medical College traveled to Israel and tested many of the community's senior adults for hypertension and high blood pressure, diseases known to disproportionately plague African Americans in the United States. The community's elderly saints were much healthier than their American counterparts, with few incidents of the aforementioned diseases (especially when compared to the African American population in the United States). During my fieldwork stints in Israel, saints always ply me with stories about septuagenarian members who regularly, say, run in Israeli marathons or take part in other nationwide sporting events. This, they argue, is only possible because of Ben Ammi's mandated, community-wide veganism, a lifestyle that has evolved over time since the Hebrew Israelites left Liberia (Ammi 1994; Hagadol and Israel 1992)<sup>20</sup>.

The group currently runs its own community-accredited "School of the Prophets", where they train their own specialists in subjects such as statesmanship, diplomacy, history, the priesthood, preventive medicine, and nutrition. One of their locally trained health experts provides visitors and guests with lectures on the health benefits of periodic colonics (which they administer to adults several times a year) and on the early twentieth century medical research conducted by French physiologist and Nobel Prize winner Alexis Carrel (Reggiani 2007; Friedman 2008). Carrel was an eccentric medical doctor who was famous for his apocryphal and tabloidized "immortal chicken heart" experiment. Starting in 1912, he claimed that he was able to keep an excised chicken's heart cells regenerating indefinitely in his laboratory. He was believed to have kept the organ alive and growing inside plasma for over three decades. The heart only "died", it was claimed, because an absent-minded office assistant failed to replenish the nutrients one morning – some thirty years into the experiment.

Explicitly invoking Carrel as a kind of experimental forefather (a controversial figure in France as a function of his work under the Nazi regime), the Black Hebrew Israelites argue that their Ammi-decreed vegan lifestyle is the key to human cell-regenerating eternal life here on earth<sup>21</sup>. The Black Hebrew Israelites argue that casein, a protein precipitated from milk, which serves as a basic element in cheese, is proven to be the single most important carcinogen in our diets, citing medical studies from all over the globe to bolster such claims (Campbell and Campbell 2005)<sup>22</sup>. The human body is only

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20 The Nation of Islam's Black Nationalist advocacy of healthy eating is in direct conversation with the Black Hebrew Israelites' interventions on this score (Muhammad 2006; Ammi 1994).

21 The Black Hebrews do not call their eating habits a "diet" at all. A diet is for people who eat to die by eating meat and meat by products. They call what their eating practices a "live-it", reminiscent of how other groups in the Black Nationalist tradition use words to literalize their critiques. I am specifically thinking about groups such as the Rastafarians and their attempts to rename, say, "understanding" "overstanding" as a way to linguistically mark their re-conceptualization of social life.

22 And they do a great job collecting tons of books that lay out similar arguments to their vegan theories, even if few others think specifically in terms of potential immortality.

fallible, they argue, only mortal, as a function of its divergence from God's Edenic laws (Griffith 2004; Madden and Finch 2006). But veganism can cure the incurable, beating back diseases such as cancer and diabetes<sup>23</sup>.

They conceptualize our bodies as walking corpses only insofar as they testify to our own cosmic disobedience. The community's concerted recuperation (through revision) of the Black Southern soul food diet (as manifested in their popular chain of vegan soul food restaurants, *Soul Veg*) is specifically meant to address that fundamental and suicidal cultural pathology of the black community. *Saints* in the kingdom are so strict about their live-it (a community-wide replacement for the word "diet"), because they want to live forever – and right here on earth, not during some fanciful heavenly afterlife. For now, they'll consider themselves well on their way toward that goal if their oldest members – *saints* in their 60s and 70s who have resided in the community for three or four decades – are able to live 125 or 150 years. Toward that end, members regulate their own *live-itary* choices and use their Biblically-informed normative claims to organize that network of vegan restaurants all around the world: in places such as Chicago, Atlanta, Los Angeles, Washington DC, Tallahassee, St. Louis, Houston, Tel Aviv, London, and Accra.

The Black Hebrews' revisionist history and counter-biology are bogeymen that exploit the kinds of fears and trepidations that plague the non-Western other, fears and trepidations that help to animate the counter-discourse of a field such as Afrocentrism, a purposeful reevaluation of the relationship between Europe and its imagined others. The unconventional theories/beliefs of figures such as Ben Ammi often allow scholars/proponents of Afrocentrism to bracket them out of serious discussions, dismissing them as odd characters with little representative value. However, I want to argue that such gestures are made at Afrocentrism's intellectual and scholarly peril, and for reasons that pivot on quite narrow definitions of Africanness. These dismissive moves mask the powerful links and parallels between Afrocentric thought and some of its marginalized, theme-sharing interlocutors, past and present. As historian James Landing (2002) contends, not accurately capturing the story of Black Judaism means potentially misunderstanding its nuanced historical relationship to Black mobilizations of Islam and Christianity (Frederick 2003; Thomas 2004). Moreover, examining how the Black Hebrew Israelites mobilize Africa as a foil and frame for their historical and biological claims demonstrates suggestive overlaps with Afrocentric presuppositions (about categorical African difference) and strategies (for reconceptualizing the African subject). Engaging such links more rigorously will only enlarge our appreciation of Afrocentrism's claims and their impact on broader and varying social, political and cultural initiatives. It will also allow us to gain a richer sense of just how far-reaching and wide-ranging Afrocentric sensibilities have become. For instance, they might even be said to play a central role in the attempt to remap Israel as Africa while providing cosmological frameworks for ethnobiological projects of genophilic racial recuperation.

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23 There is, of course, a larger movement of veganism as a kind of miracle cure and corrective for conventional dietary habits (Campbell and Campbell 2005; Trudeau 2004; Griffith 2004). The latter reference provides details about Christian commitments to disciplining the human body.

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