Inventing Jewish History, Culture, and Genetic Identity in Modern New Mexico

Judith Neulander

In the 1980s, New Mexican Hispanic folkways were widely touted in the popular press and media as "secret" or "crypto-Jewish" folkways by a small group of local academics, none a trained folklorist. I arrived in New Mexico in 1992 to create the first scholarly documentation of these folkways for a doctoral dissertation at The Folklore Institute at Indiana University. But upon investigation, claims of a significant crypto-Jewish heritage were not supported by the folkways placed in evidence. Of necessity, that anomaly became the focus of the dissertation; the doctorate was awarded in 2001.

In 2004 I learned that an independent genetic study conducted at Stanford and New York Universities had refuted academic claims of a significant crypto-Jewish component among New Mexican Hispanics; this doctoral dissertation strongly supported my ethnographic findings. But the ethnographic sophists who promote the crypto-Jewish discovery have historically dominated the popular press and media, while snail-paced publication in peer reviewed journals cannot compete for equal recognition. When this happens; which is to say, when naïve ethnographic sources become the public face of ethnographic authority, and their demonstrably unfounded claims are given as facts, their claims will be accepted as facts at the popular level. Because regional crypto-Jewish claims are still given and taken as factual, it is newly troublesome that the same academics have now fortified pseudo-ethnography with pseudo-science, inventing demonstrably unfounded, malignant genetic signatures for global Jewry, the better to ferret out "hidden Jews" among unsuspecting Hispanics. Such claims warrant a response consistent with twenty-first century scholarship norms and fieldwork ethics, since the claims have never contributed useful information, but are now reappropriating the most menacing cultural and scientific fictions of the nineteenth century.

Because regional crypto-Jewish claims are still given and taken as factual, it is newly troublesome that the same academics have now married pseudo-ethnography to pseudo-science, inventing demonstrably unfounded, malignant genetic signatures for global Jewry, the better to ferret out "hidden Jews" among unsuspecting Hispanics. Such claims warrant a response consistent with twenty-first century scholarship norms and fieldwork ethics, since the claims contribute no useful information, but simply reiterate the most menacing cultural and scientific fictions of the nineteenth century.
NINETEENTH CENTURY ADVENTURISM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

In 1878 Sir Francis Galton, cousin of Charles Darwin and father of eugenics, devised a means of sweeping together photographic images of Jewish adolescents to create a singular, composite image of the Jewish racial "type." Daniel A. Novak, Director of Jewish Studies at Louisiana State University, notes that "Galton would make photographic fiction into photographic science—a nonexistent body into a type derived with scientific accuracy—a photographic science fiction." Twelve years later, Sir James Frazer would also produce as academic scholarship the first in twelve volumes of The Golden Bough; 500,000 words of little current value, given his conflation of superficial cultural similarities into false cultural composites—an ethnographic cultural fiction.

More than a century later, a handful of New Mexican academics would follow Frazer, sweeping together ambiguous Hispanic and Jewish folkways into a false secret- or crypto-Jewish composite. Promoting this as academic scholarship, and following Galton’s notion that he could register types of the racial and diseased—or more precisely, that disease could be used as a Jewish ethnic marker—New Mexican academics performed a truly remarkable feat: they resurrected nineteenth century race science in the age of the human genome.

As part of this project, the lead proponent of crypto-Jewish claims published a book in 2005, titled To the End of the Earth. The book is useful to the extent that it collates items already documented in the history of secret- or crypto-Jews in colonial Spanish America. But when it focuses on the subject of its subtitle: A History of the Crypto-Jews of New Mexico, it regresses to a time of ethnographic and genetic sophistry, when untested assumptions could be supported by sweeping into one, overgeneralized "Jewish" category select instances that upon investigation have no such connection and when disease could go unchallenged as a Jewish ethnic marker. Not surprisingly, the book’s highest praises are found in reviews written by fellow crypto-Jewish claims-makers, not in reviews written by specialists in the academic disciplines required for knowledgeable critique. This may reflect the fact that such specialists are small in number, but happily, they are not impossible to find and they include Aviva Ben-Ur, Associate Professor of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies at Amherst, a recognized specialist and respected author on Spanish Jews in the Americas. Ben-Ur reviewed the book’s crypto-Jewish assertions, as follows:

The real problem is not historical plausibility but rather methodology. ... It is specifically in this sense that To the End of the Earth is unsettling. This is a book that often places the horse behind the cart: the evidence is tailored to the interpretation. Moreover, the bulk of the author’s arguments represent leaps of logic, circular reasoning, conjectures built upon conjectures, and conclusions based on unverifiable oral testimony and material culture.

The major downfall of New Mexican crypto-Jewish claims seems to be a lack of specific training in the theories, methods, and techniques that developed over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in ethnographic and genetic studies, as suggested by a consistent mismatch of research backgrounds to research topics among New Mexican investigators; for example, a sociologist without folkloristic training paired with a historian without folkloristic training and someone from women’s studies without folkloristic training, all attempting to do the work of a trained folklore specialist. Others cited in the book as co-investigators include a high school Spanish literature teacher to do the work of an ethnomusicologist and a medical internist to conduct research in population genetics.

Other recurrent problems in crypto-Jewish reporting include attempts to discredit critics personally, rather than address criticism, and the use of literary devices like pseudopigraphy; falsely ascribing self-supporting statements to others who never made them. In the aforementioned book, for example, I appear as “folklorist Judith S. Neulander, who has dismissed any crypto-Jewish presence in New Mexico, either historical or contemporary.” Ascribing to me an indefensible (and therefore discrediting) position can be corrected by reading anything I’ve ever written, but most notably by reading my best known essay on this topic, which the book itself references. That essay opens and closes with these statements:

It is significant that I have never disputed the existence of historical crypto-Judaism in other parts of the world. Nor have I ever stated anywhere that New Mexican crypto-Judaism cannot exist. I have simply pointed out that the evidence given to justify claims of a New Mexican crypto-Jewish past is unfounded. I have consciously avoided suggesting that a crypto-Jewish presence never existed in New Mexico.

The general public is not held to academic standards in the strategic and creative ways it may choose to reconstruct the past, interpret the present, or otherwise make sense of the world. Moreover, anyone can make a mistake, and since humans are imperfect beings, we may all do so from time to time. But when academics consistently fail to test their assumptions in any valid or reliable context, when they consistently adjust facts to support their assumptions, and when they consistently misrepresent others to promote their own credibility, they are producing something other than scholarship. At best, they are at risk of
doing what Galton and Frazer did in the nineteenth century: inventing what they want to find, rather than discovering it.

INVENTING A CRYPTO-JEWISH PAST IN NEW MEXICO

Documented history not only provides a critical frame of reference for trained ethnographic investigation—particularly with regard to objects in material culture—but it also provides the best example of how easily unrelated cultural items can be swept into false cultural relatedness with no frame of reference to prevent it. For example, assuming a complete lack of any historical context, one could plausibly conclude that swastikas woven into nineteenth century Navaho blankets were woven by "Navaho Nazis" [Fig. 1]. The absurdity is apparent for one reason only: we already possess a well-documented historical context that clearly refutes it. Conversely, far fewer people have any frame of reference for symbols like the hexagram, or six-pointed star, a representative example among copious New Mexican artifacts naïvely mislabeled "crypto-Jewish" in New Mexico. Because hexagrams are widely recognized as Jewish and perhaps because Judaism is older than Christianity, it was apparently assumed that hexagrams found in Christian context must have been borrowed from Judaism and placed in New Mexico by hidden Jews. But if the hexagram is instead placed in historical context, we learn that the history of the symbol is the other way around: the hexagram was prolific in Christian décor, appearing in Christian contexts across the vast expanse of Europe and throughout the lands of European conquest for centuries before it gained any Jewish religiousity.

According to renowned Judaicist, Gershom Scholem, the hexagram is not a historically Jewish symbol, much less "the" symbol of Judaism, and he adds that until the years flanking the turn of the twentieth century "no one even dreamt of such meaning"; he identifies naïfs who see "signs" of Judaism in Christian hexagrams as "members of the far-flung clan of Interpretobold Symbolizetti Allegorovitch Mystificinski." Clearly, the appearance of hexagrams in New Mexico’s Christian mainstream—as in the seventeenth century Church of San Felipe de Neri, in Santa Fe [Fig. 2]—is no evidence of a significant component of colonial crypto-Jews among New Mexico’s first (and doomed) seventeenth-century settlers, nor among the eighteenth-century founders of today’s Hispanic community. In addition, a wide variety of Christian congregations have historically made prolific use of hexagrams in both Catholic and Protestant church décor, as well as on gravestones.

At least one other item in gravestone iconography, prolific in the southwest and across the nation (a three-pronged stamen in the center of flowers ubiquitous in tombstone design), is similarly touted as a "secret crypto-Jewish" grave-marker because it looks like a Hebrew letter. But the Christian hexagram can be swept into overgeneralized crypto-Jewish identification only if one remains innocent of the history of the symbol, while the three-pronged stamen can be identified as a Hebrew letter only by selective attention to a superficial likeness, completely overlooking the obvious: any symbol in widespread use among all religions is useless as a means to distinguish one from any other.
Nevertheless, an equally naïve media and popular press can spread highly sensationalized mis- and disinformation faster, farther, and wider than good information could hope to do in professionally vetted, peer-reviewed publications. Thus, as early as 1994, as far away as Gibraltar, a participant at an international conference written up in a Turkish newsletter suggested that “visiting Albuquerque could be considered a pilgrimage for Jews, since the early crypto-Jewish settlers of the city left indications of their Jewish roots in their churches and cemeteries.”

Because accuracy is the only goal in normative academic research, one’s assumptions are first tested and are then adjusted to fit the facts. Conversely, when trained academics violate scholarship norms by adjusting facts to fit their assumptions, it suggests either an ignorance of academic scholarly norms or an undisclosed agenda more valued than accuracy.

AGENDA-DRIVEN RESEARCH IN NEW MEXICO

One of the first academics to assert a crypto-Jewish presence in New Mexico provides us with a textbook example of agenda-driven research, stating: “Rather than seeking information to verify [a] crypto-Jewish presence, I assumed that crypto-Jews or their heirs had settled in New Mexico”; then, in order to support an assumption never-to-be-tested, he sets out “to determine whether cultural elements exist which can most plausibly be interpreted as remnants of crypto-Jewish strands within New Mexican Indohispano culture.” But as folklorist Henry Glassie writes: “It is no test of the scholar or his craft to invent a theory and pop bits of information into it... There must be, then a strategy...that moves vigorously, not by means of hypothesis about particular cultures or things, but by means of theories of inquiry not tied to particular cultures or things.” In this case, the New Mexican investigator follows no theory of inquiry. Instead of testing his assumption for accuracy, he simply cherry-picks select instances to support it. The agenda-driven strategy is the only way to ensure discovery of what he wants to find, whether it be Navahos, Nazis, or descendants of crypto-Jews. From a trained folkloristic point of view, such dilettantism is extremely serious, not only because it defeats the purpose of folkloristic scholarship, but because it falsifies the raw data of folklore; such falsification contaminates the field beyond recovery, denying access to the culture rather than providing it and erasing the documented past.

Documented history is an essential research context, or frame of reference, for testing what can, and can’t, be logically concluded about New Mexico’s ethnic past. It confirms, for a start, that the State of New Mexico was once part of the Spanish Empire and became an American territory in 1846; statehood followed in 1912, and the modern state is now located on the American side of the border with Mexico. But before assuming that New Mexico’s founding fathers included a significant component of secretly professing Spanish Jews, it is important to note that New Mexico’s Hispanic ancestors left Spain after the Jews had already been expelled; they were an identical slice of the Spanish population that remained there after the Jews were gone. This is a critical piece of information. Certainly, an indeterminate number of Jews converted in order to remain in Spain after the expulsion, and by 1492, an equally indeterminate number of Spanish Christians were long unaware of having past Jewish ancestry. But the notion that descendants of Jews who remained in Spain after 1492 comprised a secretly professing, significant component of the mainstream Spanish population is inconsistent with documented history. Moreover, according to documented history, the Iberian population that generated, modified, and maintained crypto-Judaism on the Peninsula was not Spanish.

HISTORICAL CRYPTO-JEWS ON THE IBERIAN PENINSULA

Regardless of religious commitment, or lack thereof, all peninsular Spaniards were officially Christian by August of 1492, and the Holy Office of the Spanish Inquisition, according to its charter, was charged with bringing strays back into the fold. Although its persecutory travesties are chilling, it was not a Jew-baiting organization; it wielded unwelcome persecution against any (and only) transgressing Christians, including heretics of all stripes and other assorted miscreants. It is generally accepted that not all who admitted to heresy under torture, or who named others under torture, can be believed.

But more importantly, Spanish converts were neither the primary source nor the primary carriers of crypto-Judaism on the Iberian Peninsula. Rather, the folk religion known as crypto-Judaism emerged independently in Portugal. The historical record has similarly confirmed that New Mexican heritage is proudly Spanish, while it is well documented that crypto-Judaism in Spain was predictably sparse, idiosyncratic, and short-lived. The work of the eminent Spanish historian and anthropologist Julio Caro Baroja confirms that across postexilic Spain, crypto-Judaism was both shallow and fleeting. David Gitlitz, emeritus professor of Hispanic Studies and a recognized authority on Iberian crypto-Judaism, concurs that by 1540, Spanish converts “had been absorbed into the culture of Spanish Catholicism; the time frame is confirmed yet again
the word 'Portuguese' was synonymous with 'Jew.' In colonial Mexico, where the Spanish Inquisition was uninterested in Portuguese newcomers, Portuguese crypto-Jews professed quietly but openly, even maintaining a free-standing synagogue in Mexico City. But when Portugal regained its sovereignty, all Portuguese nationals were rounded up for deportation, and Portuguese crypto-Jews were processed by the Holy Office in Mexico City, culminating in the grand auto da fé of 1649. Survivors were expelled to Spain, but only two of the 100 sentenced to prison in Spain ever arrived, and these two never served jail terms.

Rather, members of this population turn up where one would logically anticipate them: some in the British Caribbean, a stopping place for water before crossing the Atlantic, where all passengers were allowed to disembark and where Great Britain gave sanctuary; others show up again in Europe, in Leghorn and Salonika, for example, and in Amsterdam, some dispatched from Amsterdam to investigate trade with Sephardi communities in America’s British colonies. The pattern is clearly one of seeing personal security and mercantile opportunity—important because Portuguese crypto-Jews of the 1640s onward would have been well aware of Spanish New Mexico as a sparsely populated backwater with no economic prospects; a hotbed of vicious judaizing accusations routinely investigated by the same Inquisition responsible for their own persecution and expulsion.

Not surprisingly, when New Mexico’s new state historian announced that a significant number of New Mexican Hispanics descend from eighteenth century crypto-Jews, no one pointed to potential remnants of the expelled Portuguese crypto-Jews so well documented in the seventeenth century. Instead—since Hispanics in New Mexico are indisputably of Spanish, not of Portuguese descent—they pointed to a significant component of eighteenth century purportedly “Spanish” crypto-Jews, on which history and culture are mutually silent. The notion of a historically and culturally significant crypto-Jewish settlement, as purportedly indicated by ubiquitous statewide folkways, is not only inconsistent with ubiquitous statewide folkways, but also with the history of modern New Mexico’s founding fathers. Predictably, it also contradicts New Mexico’s Hispanic DNA profile.

HISPANIC NEW MEXICO’S GENETIC HERITAGE

Historically, migration to the new world was predominantly male, and colonial males built families with women already there; DNA data confirms, and it is generally accepted that maternal heritage in the Spanish Americas is predominantly
Native American. In New Mexico, male descendants of the Spanish founding fathers specifically self-identify as either Hispanics or Spanish Americans, as distinct from Mexicans and other populations in the region. An independent genetic study published in 2006 found the DNA profile of males in modern Spain to be identical to that of males who identify as Hispanic or Spanish American in modern New Mexico; both modern communities perfectly representing the genetic makeup of Spain after the Jews were expelled. Percentages of all other factions of the modern Spanish male population (5 percent Berber, for example) are also identical in both populations; the only difference between New Mexico and Spain is a 2.2 percent Native American admixture in New Mexico.

Human beings carry no genes for religious affiliation, but ancestral origins and migrations can be traced according to genetic mutations, or markers, that are distinct to certain geographical areas. On this basis, Wesley Sutton found the frequency of Middle Eastern ancestry at 10 percent among males in both modern Spain and modern New Mexico. But this 10 percent will necessarily represent all Middle Eastern populations that left a significant genetic imprint in Spain—Phoenicians and Arabs, for example, as well as Jews—complicated by the fact that we can rarely distinguish Arabs from Jews using DNA. Because the region has a Middle Eastern component at 10 percent, and because this population is not entirely Jewish, that means more than 90 percent of males in modern Spain and in Hispanic New Mexico have no Jewish ancestry whatsoever. Moreover, it is impossible to say if any actual instance of Sephardi descent in New Mexico is also crypto-Jewish. That determination would require historical and cultural evidence of a crypto-Jewish tradition, neither of which has been found in New Mexico.

Knowing the profile of postexilic males with Middle Eastern ancestry is identical in both Spain and New Mexico, Sutton concluded that if the purportedly "significant" component of professing crypto-Jews had been added to the Spanish founding fathers of modern New Mexico, there would be a higher percentage of Middle Eastern ancestry in New Mexico than in Spain. But the percentage is identical in both populations, refuting the claim that any additional (let alone significant) component of Spanish crypto-Jews entered the territory with the founding fathers, or for that matter, at any time afterward. Descent from a significant settlement of eighteenth century crypto-Jews appears to be an origin myth imposed upon New Mexico's Hispanic community, without evidence, and by sheer power of academic fiat.

NEW MEXICO: MULTIPLE PEOPLES, MULTIPLE ORIGIN MYTHS

Folklorists, like other academic researchers, are also reliant on accurate historical frames of reference. But oral history, as given by a people in their own words, is constructed in an entirely different way and for different purposes than academic scholarship. That is, a people's own reconstruction of the past is sacrosanct in folklore studies because it is the substance of their self-made collective identity. A community's own reconstruction of the past, including ideas it may choose to adopt and adapt from outside influences, will always serve its own best interest, expressed according to its own values and aesthetics, aspirations and animosities; that is, supporting its own distinct worldview. The historical accuracy of a peoples' reconstruction of the past is of no consequence whatsoever to folklorists, since (historically accurate or not) the narrative will always give us access to the community's values and aesthetics, aspirations and animosities, the entire worldview of those who hold it in tradition, and it will do so with unrivaled accuracy. New Mexico is no exception.

Fig. 3. Spanish colonials were divided into 22 color-coded castas, or castes, in descending order from Iberian-born Spaniards through increasingly mixed degrees of color-coded heritage.
By the turn of the eighteenth century, Spanish Americans already had a richly mixed ancestral heritage, but they bore it under the burden of Spanish colonial racism. Regional ancestry was configured in New Mexico according to twenty-two caste divisions, lavishly illustrated in descending order from “pure” (white) Spaniards, along a downward spiral of increasingly mixed heritage and color-coded devaluation.27 [Fig. 3] Spanish Jews were conspicuously absent from the painfully ostracizing New Mexican caste system, a strong indicator that they were, in fact, absent from New Mexico. But to best avoid social marginalization in what was visibly a population of mixed heritage, New Mexico’s internal origin myth generated belief in communal descent from “pure” Spanish conquistadors.28 The aristocratic prestige lineage, like all internally generated origin myths, served the best interests of the (physically and visually diverse) community that held it in tradition. That is, regardless of appearances, everyone’s purported aristocratic descent lay beyond proof or disproof by anyone else, so no one could discriminate against anyone else with absolute certainty—at least not on the basis of appearance alone—an ingenious strategy for limiting the negative effects of the colonial caste system.

But when people are stripped of the right to self-identify, they are forced to sublimate their own best interests to those of supposedly “better” authorities and to express their new, superimposed identity (along with its new social status, or lack thereof) in terms consistent with those wielding the power to redefine them. It is never in the best interest of any community to lose its autonomous power of self-definition; this is something Jews have learned at an exorbitant cost. Under certain conditions, as Jews well know, the nature of a subjugated peoples’ positive or negative definition, particularly by a hostile dominant culture, can too easily become a matter of life and death. Spanish and Anglo-Europeans who colonized the Americas certainly made that clear according to the “savage” identity they imposed upon native peoples, thereby justifying European savagery in the name of civilization.

NEW MEXICO AND THE LOST TRIBES ORIGIN MYTH

There is no record of modern New Mexico’s founding fathers defining themselves as Jews or as descendants of Jews. But, like most European colonials, they clearly defined Native Americans as Jews, or “lost tribes of Israel,” an origin myth for which there is a wealth of documentation.29 The imposition of that identity, and the status assimilated to it, was typically imperialist and self-serving. For example, Alejandro Mora, a resident of Bernalillo, New Mexico in 1751, gave what was then a socially acceptable explanation for beating an Indian slave:

"God has given me life," said Mora, "so that I might do to these Jews what they did to our Holiest Lord."30

In the 1800s, Anglo-Americans arrived sharing the same beliefs about Native American origins. By the time railroads and motor cars were bringing tourists to New Mexico’s strikingly biblical wilderness, the habitual association of lost, exotic Jews with New Mexico’s wilderness landscape and its tribal peoples was prolific in local rhetoric as well as travel literature.31 In 1896, a contestant won ten dollars from the Eastman Kodak Company for a photo of an Indian woman carrying a traditional water jug [called an olla], titled “A New Mexican Rebecca” [Fig. 4], clearly a reference to the biblical Rebecca at the well. Travel writing reflects the same habitual “orientalizing” or association of New Mexico’s tribal peoples with ancient Israelites, describing Indian farmers using “digging sticks of Moses” and Indian women as “Maidens of Palestine.”32 Writing in 2002, Michael P. Carroll, then chair of Sociology at the University of Western Ontario, a respected author with a specialty in religious cultures of New Mexico, notes that New Mexican crypto-Jewish claims have gained tremendous appeal “independent of evidence”; he attributes this phenomenon, at least in part, to a well-documented history of “orientalizing” in Anglo discourse about New Mexico.33 With the establishment of the State of Israel in the 1940s, the orientalized “Maidens of Palestine” would become “Olla Maidens,” but unsettling social shifts, and a subsequent bout of newly racialized identity-switching, would come to orientalize New Mexican Hispanics, in their place.

The stage was probably set in 1932, when Cecil Roth’s bestseller, A History of the Marranos, ignited wild speculation on modern survivals of lost, hidden Jews in the Spanish Americas. Naive ethnographic amateurs on the Mexican side of the border were quick to “discover” that Protestant Sabbatarian, self-termed “Mexican Indians” were descendants of purportedly Spanish crypto-Jews. Lauded folklorist and ethnologist, Raphael Patai, refuted these
claims in the 1940s, and again in the 1960s, noting that to relieve marginalization by the Spanish-American caste system, "It is a frequent phenomenon for an Indian to claim to be a mestizo [of mixed race], and for a mestizo to claim pure Spanish descent," adding, "Spanish descent, even Jewish-Spanish descent, means a step up on the social scale."34

Patai may have reached the scholarly community, but rumor and gossip prevailed at the popular level, where Judeo-Spanish ancestry had long been dogma in the Spanish-speaking branches of Saturday-worshipping Anglo-Israelist churches that first attracted followers in Mexico, and later in the Spanish-speaking southwest. As Patai noted, these are congregations that define themselves as lost tribes of Israel, redeemed by accepting Christ and therefore comprising the "true" spiritual Jews (unlike the "fleshy" traditional Jews of Israelist imagination). Native Mexican congregations claim to have long preceded Cortez to America and to have become the "Mexican Indians." Similar origin myths, foregoing association with Indians, persist in southwestern Spanish-speaking variants of Israelist churches, judging by an extant congregation in Texas. This congregation is periodically "discovered" to descend from crypto-

Jews by succeeding generations of ethnographic amateurs, recycling the same naive views that surfaced in the 1930s regarding the original Mexican-Israelist congregations.35 [Fig. 5].

Unsettling shifts in self-definition among New Mexico's Hispanics of mixed heritage first began in the 1970s, when Father Angelico Chavez, a well-respected New Mexican priest, published a detailed genealogy of the founding fathers that refuted the people's ingenious, racially neutralizing "conquistador" myth.36 At roughly the same time, buoyed by the strong egalitarian movements of the 1960s to 1970s, New Mexican Native Americans asserted their civil rights, throwing off the yoke of Spanish and Anglo imperialism that had long disenfranchised them and taking back the power of their own self-definition. To their successful art markets they would add a cultural center and museum in the major city of Albuquerque, taking authorship of their own history, identity, and public display.

But in the process, they left the land empty of long lost Israelites, a tradition likely to be missed in association with a biblical wilderness that had historically defined its natives as exotic, lost tribes. If not missed for that alone, the lost, hidden Jews would almost certainly be missed as lost tourist revenue. Thus, in 1980, shortly after the traditional Hispanic prestige lineage was disconfirmed, New Mexico hired a state historian whose doctoral dissertation had focused on crypto-Jews in colonial Spanish America (although not in New Mexico). He reported a spate of the same rumors and gossip addressed by Raphael Patai, still circulating at the popular level on both sides of the border.

Hearing the same information as Patai, but lacking Patai's ethnographic training, he naively concluded that ubiquitous statewide folkways (e.g., six-pointed stars and gravestone stelae) indicated a significant crypto-Jewish settlement in New Mexico, and gave this unexamined conjecture to the popular press and media as a scholarly research finding. Since no ordinary journalist or journalistic fact-checker knew enough to challenge the "breaking news," it was almost globally celebrated. Back in New Mexico, however, this pseudo-ethnographic, academically imposed prestige lineage was stirring a formerly cohesive Hispanic community along old colonial fault lines of color-coded prejudice—but this time, reinforced through the imperial eyes of an Anglo ruling class that classified Jews with overvalued whites, and New Mexicans with peoples of color. The most vulnerable (or perhaps the most opportunistic) New Mexicans soon began "whitening" their ancestral heritage, substituting ersatz Jewish-Spanish descent for the old, protective conquistador origin myth.

Fig. 5. Amateurs still mistake Spanish-speaking variants of Anglo-Israelist congregations as "descendants of crypto-Jews," although the claim was long ago refuted by lauded ethnologist Raphael Patai. Photo, "Iglesia de Dios Israelita" by Janice Rubin. Courtesy Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review 15:2 (1993): 141.
By the 1980s, the Anglo-American population had come to outnumber Hispanics in New Mexico, and the new minority was redefined accordingly. Reduced to “ethnics” on their own turf, New Mexican Hispanics became the newly orientalized replacement Jews. Uprooted from their land, their cultural heritage, and now from the power of autonomous self-definition, the vast majority of Spanish Americans elected to move on, at least unburdened by resurgent colonial racism. But the media ignored them. Instead, a tiny but vocal minority was almost hysterically celebrated in the international press and media, having suddenly “recovered” memories of an ennobling and martyrdom Jewish past, a past that allowed subscribers to deflect outrage at historical Anglo abuses onto a safe inquisitional villain, to ingratiate themselves to an ascendant Anglo hegemony, and to gain protective status according to their new, religiously empty but racially redefining prestige lineage.

At first, the tiny number of Hispanics sufficiently traumatized to assert crypto-Jewish descent, or sufficiently opportunist to try and benefit from the assertion, backed their claims with memories of purported crypto-Jewish practices that contradicted history, culture, and each other so transparently that one could claim credibility only by attempting to malign the other. It took years of academic interviews conducted as wholesale tutelage, and years of media massaging, for purported crypto-Jewish memories to gain any stability, let alone credibility. The process clearly demonstrates what Mary Louise Pratt called “instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer’s own terms.” This was hardly an unusual circumstance, but rather “a widespread phenomenon . . . important in unraveling the histories of imperial subjugation and resistance as seen from the site of their occurrence.” New Mexican Hispanics had no shortage of help to represent themselves in the same terms used by those who would redefine them as lost, hidden Jews.

HELP TO RECOVER CRYPTO-JEWISH MEMORIES

To maintain the effectiveness of the interview process, as well as prevent abuses of academic power, the directional flow of information in ethnographic fieldwork moves primarily one way: from the expert to the non-expert; that is, from the well-informed, expert insider, to the uninformed, ethnographic outsider. According to the conduct of trained fieldwork, the ethnographer’s obligation is to learn about the peoples’ worldview from the people who hold that worldview (thus, the experts), taking great care to respect their worldview in exactly the same way one would respect a religious affiliation, similarly taking great care to do no harm in the process of interacting, and to avoid threatening the peoples’ self-defining understandings in any way, (whether one shares those understandings or not). Of necessity, reversing the role of “expert” in fieldwork is to reverse the direction of information-flow; an abuse of hegemonic power, and a strict violation of scholarship norms, as well as fieldwork ethics. Above all, one’s primary goal in ethnographic fieldwork is to leave the research site unchanged—or as unchanged as possible—by one’s presence there.

Reversing the role of expert, and the direction of authoritative information flow, could not be more socially disruptive, or more evident, than in the self-appointed role stated by a leading proponent of the crypto-Jewish canon: “to help New Mexicans today understand the complexity and rich diversity of their Hispanic and Jewish past.” But it is the ethnographer who is supposed to be helped to understand the complexity and rich diversity of the community’s past, according to its indigenous expressive behaviors and its own, autonomous self-definition. As already noted, a people’s oral history can be accurate or not; it makes no difference to an ethnographer. A people’s own narrative of “the way things are” gives us direct access to the spirit and mentality of the community that generates, modifies, and maintains it. But, the academic imposition of an erroneous reconstruction of the ethnic past, imposed upon a people unequipped to refute such hegemonic power, can only give access to the spirit and mentality of the academics doing the erroneous reconstructing—not the people whom they seek to redefine.

In the exchange below, the process of “helping” a New Mexican today “understand . . . [her] Hispanic and Jewish past” is laid bare. Here we see the interview process diverted from its academic purpose, used instead to strip the expert of her better knowledge and to massage her memory into conformity with the interviewer’s agenda-driven reconstruction of the same events. The interview was conducted in a low-income area of Albuquerque by a leading proponent of the crypto-Jewish canon, who had invited me to sit in and tape the interview. I did try to intervene once in this exchange; thus, “A” stands for the academic who conducted the interview; “P” stands for the person being interviewed, and “N” appears once, for me (Neulander). Notably, the interviewer opened the topic of local butchering traditions by violating one of the first principles of fieldwork inquiry: he set her up with what “everybody else” was supposedly doing or saying, a classic means of eliciting complicity:
A: Since I talked to you last I talked to many, many other people. And they also talked about slaughtering the lambs—the sheep. And they also would say a prayer.
P: Yes, my Dad always did.
A: But they remembered what the prayer was. And it ran something like [instructs her on the prayer]: Te pido la vida para sostener la nuestra [I ask for your life to sustain ours].
P: I don't know what my Dad used to say. He used to say things, you know, and he did—
A: [interrupts her, and again instructs] He said it in a different language.
P: [repeats, as instructed] In a different language.
A: Would you recognize the language if someone said it?
P: I probably would. You know, some words, yeah.
N: What words? [I tried to learn if she had any independent recall before he instructed her]
A: [interrupts before she could answer, and instructs]:
Like: [he recited a portion of the kaddish, the mourner's prayer, in Hebrew]
P: I remember that.
A: [continues instructing, reciting the kaddish in Hebrew]
P: Yes, some of the words. Yeah, some of the words.
A: Yeah... Did he have a name for God besides Jesus? Do you know a name for God that wasn't Jesus?
P: Yeah. No. He didn't pray to Jesus, my Dad. He prayed to God.
A: Do you remember what word he used?
P: He used to call Him Señor [Lord], and then he used to call Him Padre [Father]. Father, he used to call Him. Hmm. He used to call Him other names. He used to call Him “the lamb.” The borrego [lamb], he used to call Him—not that was Jesus. But he used to say something borrego sometimes. I can't remember.
A: [instructs her] Adonai?
P: Huh?
A: [repeats instruction] Adonai?
P: [no response, waits for further instruction]
A: [instructs again] Yahweh?
P: [repeats the instruction] Yahweh, yeah! He used to call Him Yahweh. Uh huh. In fact, a lot, he used to call Him that.
A: [instructs her] Porque es el nombre en hebreo para dios [Because it is the name in Hebrew for God].

Fig. 6. Academics promoting the crypto-Jewish canon were among the first to promote crypto-Jewish tourism in the Southwest. Courtesy of the New Mexico Jewish Historical Society.

Except for the informant's contribution on the God names her father used in prayer (all consistent with Christian prayer, but not all consistent with Jewish prayer), the entire exchange is a one-sided academic tutorial. It is important to note, as seen here, that at the lower end of the region's socioeconomic and ethnic hierarchies, reconstruction of an informant's racially redefining crypto-Jewish past was often a cooperative effort. As Patai noted, even Jewish-Spanish descent can be a step up on the social scale, especially since the new Jewish prestige lineage (unlike the old conquistador heritage) is not inclusive; it strates the formerly cohesive society into old colonial, color-coded divisions according to who accepts the crypto-Jewish fiction, and who does not, or who thinks they can or can't be counted in according to physical appearance, or skin color. As one darker-skinned sister of a lighter-skinned brother stated, "He can get away with it, but not me. I don't think I look the part."

Yet for many Hispanics—let alone those who are socially marginalized in New Mexico—there are numerous encouragements to comply; it can be exciting to be interviewed by journalists (if not academics), to have your picture appear in The New York Times, in local magazines, and on TV. For the sufficiently entrepreneurial, Hispanic or not, it can also be a business opportunity. Academic proponents of the crypto-Jewish canon, for example, were among the first to promote crypto-Jewish tourism, charging tourists to “meet descendants of the ‘Hidden Jews’” [Fig. 6], “descendants” like the woman we just saw being “helped to understand...[her] Hispanic and Jewish past.”

Massaging of Hispanic memory was so endemic on the street, in the media, and in quasi-academic contexts like documentary films, speaking engagements, and as well as local conferences preaching to an ever-growing choir, I quickly learned that when someone informed me of crypto-Jewish descent, I could not assume the information was privileged Hispanic knowledge. Rather, upon investigation, knowledge of crypto-Jewish ancestry was categorically absent from everyone’s family history narrative.
Hispanics were most often convinced of their Jewish descent by academic conflations of perceived Jewish symbols, or "motifs" with familiar, but ambiguous folkways, for example, by conflating a Hebrew letter with a superficially related design on tombstones across all faiths, by pointing to hexagrams in local church décor, or by pointing to the ubiquitous New Mexican gambling top, although this Roman-Iberian artifact is historically and culturally unrelated to the Yiddish dreidel—an Ashkenazi toy never used in Sephardi (Iberian Jewish) tradition, that was borrowed from a pagan winter solstice top, spun in England and Germany.40

In this connection, a retired school teacher proudly shared with me a child's assignment that dates back more than 30 years. In 1981, pupils in her largely Hispanic fourth grade class had been asked to illustrate a family tradition and to describe it in Spanish and English. One child described her grandfather's use of the local "trompo," the traditional Roman-Iberian gambling top, which according to the child, was taught to her grandfather by a friend of his father's. The teacher—convinced by the crypto-Jewish canon that the child must belong to a secretly Jewish family—"corrected" the child's paper by following the local academic lead, sweeping into one overgeneralized category of false Jewish relatedness, the Iberian top and the Yiddish dreidell, and having the child collate the two by giving her a dreidell template, instructing her to add the image of a dreidell to her description of her grandfather's tradition, and to add Hebrew letters, as well as rewrite the word "trompo" as "dreidel" [Fig. 7]. It is hard to say how influential this type of instruction is, or is not, but it is probably safe to say that for more than 30 years, countless New Mexican Hispanics have undergone continuous sabotage of their own rich heritage by crypto-Jewish identity-tweaking, almost always from an authority figure like a teacher, a doctor, or someone important enough to be given a public forum in print or in the media.

Fig. 7. A teacher "corrects" a Hispanic child, instructing her to add an Ashkenazi dreidel to her drawing of New Mexico's ubiquitous (Roman-Iberian) gambling top, misrepresenting the toy (and the child) as having crypto-Jewish origins.

One woman's experience reflects the impact of identity-tweaking information that she—like most people—was in no position to judge as anything but "informative and well documented," given the lofty academic source. Notably, she is also typical in having "contemplated being of Jewish background" for some time before her final revelation, confirming that like all purported descendants in the 1990s, no such information was handed down to her by her family. Notably, her construction of Hispanic heritage is so self-consciously color-coded, that Spanish Jews in her narrative (considered white) cannot also be Hispanic (considered non-white); thus, in her narrative, she herself becomes "a non-Hispanic entity" because of an alleged Jewish pattern or (white) "paradigm" in ubiquitous local traditions. Once the quest for (racially meaningful and religiously empty) Jewish descent begins in New Mexico, family history narratives are adjusted as part of the process, which we'll see shortly. But in the 1990s, revelation of Jewish ancestry was still uniformly reported as coming from a handful of academics, outside the family. In her account, the academic "evidence" she is given consists of nothing more than superficial, unexamined, cultural similarities, between "specific [Jewish] indicators" and local [Hispanic] traditions41 (my italics):

I heard Stan Horvitz speak for the first time about four years ago. He was speaking in Colorado Springs about Crypto-Jews of the Southwest. I saw the notice in the newspaper and decided to attend the session. His talk was informative and well documented. After his presentation I was reflecting on the extent and magnitude of my own personal ruminations... The result of the quest is that the individual identifies specific indicators relative to traditions... that culminate in a non-Hispanic entity that reflects a Jewish paradigm.

(emphasis added)

By the 1990s, purportedly Jewish "indicators" relative to Hispanic "traditions" were in wide circulation and had become habitually associated with crypto-Jewish ancestry in New Mexico. Thus, crypto-Jewish reporting is often formulaic, using these same "motifs" over and over to indicate Jewish heritage. There were two Jewish motifs frequently assimilated to home butchering, for example; one was the humane use of a sharp knife for slaughter. But like institutionalized graveyard art, use of a sharp knife is not Jewish private property and is too widely practiced to serve as a crypto-Jewish marker. Nevertheless, like the hexagram, tombstone stamens, and everything else purportedly crypto-Jewish, the sharp knife serves as a crypto-Jewish motif in New Mexico. Thus, with local academic support it is popularly used as an indicator of the crypto-Jewish ethnicity it does not actually indicate.
The second butchering motif is the distinctly Jewish, and therefore ethnographically useful, practice of draining and discarding the animal’s blood rather than consuming it.

It is important to note that in her study of crime reporting in the late nineteenth century, Anne B. Cohen found that ballad formulae—specifically the habitual repetition of oral motifs in different murdered sweetheart ballads—were used to mold different narratives into reaching the same moral lessons. According to Cohen, these literary motifs proved powerful enough to shape newspaper reports of real crimes involving young women murdered by their boyfriends. Cohen’s research found that these motifs affected journalistic memory of crimes to the point where “there was a tendency to interpret events in terms of [them]... even when distortion was required to accomplish it.” Cohen attributes this narrative tendency to “tension between fact and formula,” or what Albert Lord first called a “tension of essences,” whereby narrative motifs, like sharp knives and spilled blood, “go with” crypto-Jewish butchering to such a habitual extent that memories of New Mexican butchering will be adjusted, or as Cohen writes, “distorted” to accommodate them.

We can see this process at work in a butchering account by two different generations of the same family. First we hear from the informant whose interview on butchering we read above, elaborating further on the subject of her father’s butchering ritual, which included bleeding the animal and using the blood for family consumption. As occurred earlier in the interview, she contradicts herself if and when she realizes her recall is in conflict with Jewish motifs, as when she stated of her dad: “He didn’t pray to Jesus, my Dad, except, it seems, when he prayed to Jesus as the borrego, or lamb of God (see also, “It tasted good... but I didn’t like it” below). But a year later, her son would describe his grandfather’s butchering techniques for Palacio Magazine, incorporating the region’s two formulaic crypto-Jewish motifs: humane use of a sharp knife and draining the blood to avoid consumption.

The original informant described the family’s collection and consumption of blood, as follows:

Well my Dad used to kill animals, and you know, he used to like sheep a lot. He would always bleed the animal... and so my Mom would keep the blood and clean intestines and you know, make guajada [blood sausage] with la sangre [the blood]... like jello... and then cook it with the intestine, oh, a bit of meat. It tasted good... but I didn’t like it... it’s a great sin, you know.

It is not clear that the informant’s son ever witnessed his grandfather’s butchering, but the grandfather’s recitation of a prayer survived in the young man’s memory, either as observed by him or as recalled from his mother’s accounts of family history. Yet, in his adjusted family narrative, all memory of using blood for consumption is deleted. In its place are the two popular crypto-Jewish butchering motifs: a sharp knife (which may have been an accurate memory, but is not the crypto-Jewish marker it is taken for) and the distinctly Jewish motif of bloodspilling. But his grandfather’s butchering process, as we know from his mother’s firsthand account, included collecting the blood for consumption. The young man’s memory (whether he witnessed his grandfather butcher animals or not), has been adjusted, or distorted, to accommodate crypto-Jewish motifs (my italics): “He said a prayer and cut the throat with an un-nicked knife. He drained the blood to the ground.”

This is the memory the young man will pass on to his children, and they to theirs. In this same manner, a favorite pot used exclusively by someone’s aunt for a special stew would eventually become “evidence” of a secretly kosher kitchen. Similarly, place-name and surname mythologies, transparently inconsistent with history, culture and academic etymology, have become the substance of countless, demonstrably unfounded, crypto-Jewish genealogies. Whether susceptible individuals assume they descend from crypto-Jews because they have been told as much by supposedly “better” authorities, or whether they are complicit in reconstructing a racially protective prestige lineage (or both), local history and culture are equally subsumed to the power of misguided (and misleading) academic authority. This disenfranchises all non-compliant members of what was formerly a cohesive society, distorting local memory and making it impossible for subsequent generations, or future researchers, to recover the history and culture being destroyed—some of which might have revealed crypto-Jewish traditions, if indeed they were there. The loss is incalculable; it is precisely what “contamination of the field” is named after.

In 1996, my first detailed publication on this topic was published. But rather than adjusting their assumptions to fit the facts, New Mexican academics redoubled their efforts to legitimate crypto-Jewish claims, incorporating nineteenth century race-sciences into crypto-Jewish reporting.

RACE SCIENCE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: THE JEW AS A SITE OF ULTIMATE PROJECTION

The idea that Jews comprise a distinct biological subspecies of humanity, or “Jewish race,” first gained traction in the nineteenth century, when science asserted that Jews comprised an isolated, historically monogamous, people.
Christians agreed on the basis that Jews were an anti-Christian people that had historically excluded themselves from the Christian mainstream; Jews agreed on the basis that Christians were an anti-Semitic people that had historically excluded Jews from the mainstream. The supposed isolation of the “Jewish race” never came into dispute—not because it was indisputable—but largely because the purportedly isolated “race” was a handy basis on which conflicting ideological groups could justify their own self-serving points of view. In this sense, race-science in the nineteenth century reduced the Jew to a blank screen; what Lyotard called an “ultimate site of projection.” A century later, the same nineteenth century dilettantism would enable naïve, agenda-driven academics to project seriously ill Hispanics onto the same tabula rasa, identifying them as “Jewish-by-disease.”

After the racist genocide of WWII, after science of the mid-20th century exposed race as a biologically irrational concept, and after the media exposed the ignorant, hate-twisted face of southern racism during the civil rights movements of the 1960s-70s, understanding of human differences began to change, but that understanding remains unevenly distributed. Today, few college students could seriously entertain the notion that biological races exist, except as ill-conceived social categories constructed less well-educated persons, or even by highly-degreed, but earlier-educated academics. Hence, at this time, it is not clear that scientific understanding prevails across all Americans, regardless of how far they went in school. With the completion of the Human Genome Project in 2004—given the great gap between old racialized and new genomic constructs of human difference—America was once again caught in an information-gap typical of the late nineteenth century; that is, caught between ground-breaking discoveries (e.g., photography in the 1800s; the human genome in the 2000s) and the ability to make good sense, let alone good use of them. In times of such widespread sophistry, not enough can be known fast enough to counter, anticipate, or prevent forays into academic adventurism, providing the best possible environment for agenda-driven research to proliferate. Not surprisingly, this was the time when academics in New Mexico began legitimating crypto-Jewish claims by inventing genetically “Jewish diseases” and—with no training in ethnography or genetics—began using disease as a Jewish ethnic marker.

THE FALLACY OF DISEASE-BASED JUDAISM

The first disease cited as Jewish in New Mexico—that I know of—was Niemann-Pick, which I learned of in 1992. The term Niemann-Pick refers to a group of “storage” disorders in which waste materials accumulate in human tissue and cause it to deteriorate. Since these disorders are found among Jews and Hispanics (as well as in other populations overlooked by selective inattention), proponents of the crypto-Jewish canon assumed they could identify Hispanics who suffer from these storage disorders as descendants of Jews. As it turned out, even the most rudimentary investigation shows that Jews carry only Niemann-Pick types A and B, while Hispanics carry only type C, different disorders at both the biological and chemical levels. More importantly, if Hispanics and Jews were biologically related, a strict division between the two biological types of Niemann-Pick could not occur between them. Rather, the fact that they inherit only biologically unrelated forms of this heritable disease indicates that the two populations are themselves biologically unrelated. After that revelation, use of disease as a crypto-Jewish marker should have come to an end in New Mexico. But cherry-picking of diseases found at high frequency in both populations (the same or higher frequency in other populations selectively overlooked), would continue in an unabated effort to conjure up “scientific” evidence of significant Hispanic descent from Spanish crypto-Jews; a variant of Galton’s Jewish science fiction.

In winter of 1992, in an Albuquerque coffee house, a young man convinced of his crypto-Jewish past recounted for me a Jewish-by-disease narrative in which an unidentified Hispanic woman was told by an unidentified rabbi in Colorado that her mother was Jewish, because she had a “Jewish” disease.” Ten years later, the narrative would gain academic legitimacy according to Janet Liebman Jacobs, a specialist in Women’s Studies, who heard the tale and published it as a medically sound historical account. But apparently inspired by a sensationalized outbreak of Mad Cow disease—a form of Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD)—the illness used in the Liebman Jacobs variant was a heritable form of CJD; one with an unusually high frequency in Libyan Jews. Failing to establish a link between descendants of Spanish Jews and CJD, and lacking specific training in folk narratives, Liebman Jacobs missed that fact that there is no such link, and also missed the earmarks of what was unmistakably a legend. Instead, she framed the tale as an accurate crypto-Jewish discovery, further legitimating the fiction as fact by publication in a university press.

A detailed discussion of the CJD narrative and its treatment in her book appears in an article I published in 2006. What matters here is that no case of CJD had ever been recorded in the region, either among Hispanics or anyone else, and the mother—both alive and suffering during the daughter’s purported encounter with the rabbi—was proclaimed “Jewish” on the basis of a disease that, at the time, could only be diagnosed after death.
Much more disturbing, however, was Liebman Jacobs's conformity to pseudo-ethnographic and pseudo-scientific reporting, typical of her colleagues in her consistent presentation of conjectures as academic research findings, and her use of pseudopigraphy to legitimate demonstrably unfounded claims. For example, she referred to her informant as a “descendant” although she never secured or verified the evidence given for that claim, while her preamble both mis- and disinform her readers instead of educating them: “In this case the descendant’s mother suffered from Creutzfeldt-Jacob [sic] disease, a degenerative disease of the central nervous system that has been linked specifically to Sephardic ancestry.”52 But high incidence of CJD is linked only to Libyan Jews, who have no Sephardi or any Iberian connection whatsoever. In addition, she gave a publication by Richard M. Goodman53 as the source of the “specific link” to Sephardic ancestry. But Goodman—a recognized expert on genetic diseases found among Jews—discussed inheritable CJD under the chapter heading Misconceptions, stating that CJD is not heritable; this is exactly the opposite of what Liebman Jacobs ascribed to him. He attributed the Libyan outbreak to consumption of infected sheep’s eyes, a culinary delicacy in Libya. Neither CJD’s heritability nor any link to “specifically Sephardic ancestry” was ever mentioned or even considered by Goodman.

The academic of greatest note in promoting disease-based claims of crypto-Jewish descent is the author of To the End of the Earth. In 2009, when I happened to be in New Mexico, he was using local TV news to promote the idea that Hispanics can be Jewish-by-disease.54 In addition, he is coauthor with a local New Mexican internist of a paper using a heritable blister rash called Pemphigus Vulgaris (PV) to show that Hispanics descend from crypto-Jews;55 their entire paper is reprinted in the appendix of To the End of the Earth. Notably, a year before the book was published, Ron Loewenthal, Director of the Tissue Typing Lab at Chaim Sheba Medical Center in Israel (cum laude 1985, M.D. 1987 Hebrew University; Ph.D., Cambridge University 1993, a specialist and prolific author on medical biochemistry, molecular biology and genetic tissue typing), found that disease haplotypes for PV are neither of ancient, nor of Middle Eastern origin. Loewenthal et al. found that PV haplotypes, or markers, are relatively recent and originate with a Mediterranean forebear.56

Regarding Spaniards and Jews, the study found “the distance between the two PV cohorts is relatively short, but the distance between Jewish patients and Jewish controls is greater compared to the distance between Spanish patients and Spanish controls.”57 Hence, the ancestral condition appears to have occurred first in Spaniards and then spread to Jewish populations. Moreover, as Sutton showed in 2006, the paternal profile of the vast majority of New Mexican Hispanics is significantly different from that of all Jews, including Iberian Jews, and at the same time is indistinguishable from Mediterranean Spaniards.58 Therefore, the more logical conclusion is that high incidence of PV among New Mexican Hispanics does not indicate descent from Jews, but reflects instead descent from the same Mediterranean forebears who spread PV to Jews.

In 2009 I was in New Mexico doing IRB-approved research, funded by the National Institutes of Health and The Center for Genetic Research Ethics and Law. I was concerned that New Mexican Jewish-by-disease claims would breathe new life into the old saw that Jews are a contaminated and contaminating “race.” On the way to the research site I shared my interest in “Jewish” diseases with a fellow traveler in the Chicago airport. She referred me to a Hispanic co-worker in New Mexico who was told her family carries a Jewish disease. During my subsequent interview with the co-worker, I was informed that one parent belonged to a large group of siblings with a high rate of mental illness. The mental health professional handling the case first informed the family they descend from crypto-Jews because Jews have a
higher rate of mental illness than other people, a common and unsubstantiated antisemitic refrain. The doctor also told the family their descent from Spanish crypto-Jews is confirmed by coming from the general area of northern New Mexico and southern Colorado—a crypto-Jewish demographic fiction wholly attributed to the crypto-Jewish canon. The doctor further explained that the first mental institution in New Mexico had to be built in that region, because “that’s where the Jews were.” Antisemitic rhetoric like this, built upon local Jewish-by-disease claims, was not hard to find in New Mexico. This instance is an important example, in part because it comes from the highest tier of New Mexican society, and in part because it has become so prolific, I was directed to it before I even got there.

PUTTING AN END TO JEWISH-BY-DISEASE CLAIMS

Almost coincidental with that interview, “Jewish” cancer claims were featured on an Albuquerque news program, endorsed by the author of the erroneous Jewish-by-disease paper reprinted in the appendix of his book, which as we have seen, is similarly error-riddled on the topic of crypto-Jews. The TV news chose to first establish local crypto-Jewish ancestry by using a local geological landmark. We may recall (although the program did not), that Native Americans were the original purported Jews and they left a legacy of inscriptions in the form of copious cryptic petroglyphs. Perhaps it was inevitable that a purported “sign” of the ancestral Hispanic replacement Jews would similarly be discovered in New Mexico, also as a cryptic petroglyph. That purpose is currently served by a stone known as “Mystery Rock,” located in the desert west of Los Lunas, New Mexico [Fig. 8].

First noticed in the 1930s (when the inscriptions were probably created), the rock was originally said to be a rendition of the Ten Commandments in Phoenician. Since almost no one in New Mexico knows what Hebrew looks like, let alone Phoenician, the stone was later assimilated to the crypto-Jewish canon as a “Hebrew” text carved by ancestral crypto-Jews. Perhaps because there is more mileage to be gained by mystifying than clarifying, academic promoters of the canon have spent more than thirty years maintaining silence on shrugging unknowingly when approached for scholarly clarification of the rock’s inscriptions. Thus, the news program was able to cite Mystery Rock as a crypto-Jewish landmark, the better to reinforce a spate of pseudoscientific cancer babble, mislabeling catastrophically ill Hispanics as “Jewish by disease.”

My investigation began with the rock. A five-minute Internet query led me to Jo Ann Hackett, well-known Hebrew epigrapher and linguistic scholar, then at Harvard on her way to the University of Texas at Austin, to revise the Brown-Driver-Briggs lexicon. “I wish things were always so easy,” she responded, explaining, “This isn’t ancient Phoenician or Hebrew or anything else.” Rather, it is a concoction of unrelated letters taken from ancient alphabets of many different languages in conflicting historical periods, as are sometimes found in cheap printouts of ancient alphabets, but are never found written together in legitimate historical texts. In addition, according to Hackett, the rock’s text is partially incomplete, some letters are written backwards or upside down, and some words are misspelled. Thus, it appears that whoever made this effort was an amateur, making no pretense whatsoever at either Hebrew, or Phoenician, but clearly involved in a fanciful linguistic lark.

That same summer, similarly based on misdirection by local academics, museums in both Albuquerque and Santa Fe were planning crypto-Jewish exhibitions, and a major crypto-Jewish festival was planned in Albuquerque, promoted by Father Bill Sanchez, a Catholic priest featured on the Jewish-by-disease news program—a priest either deliberately misled or himself deliberately misleading.

The news segment opened with the statement: “Secrets are being revealed!” and moved from there to Mystery Rock. “Some people think this is just a hoax,” the journalist stated, “But . . .”; having titled his piece “Hidden Heritage Exposes Cancer Risk,” he used Mystery Rock to firmly establish New Mexico’s crypto-Jewish heritage, ignoring (as did Father Bill) any qualified source on Hebrew epigraphy. Having himself misrepresented the text as Hebrew, Father Bill is then shrouded in the sacred trappings of Jewish worship, laying his hands on the amateur alphabetical concoction and chanting Hebrew prayers. “Just like the prayer, the words are written in Hebrew,” the TV journalist reiterated, after which Father Bill added the biologically impossible statement: “Eighty percent of my DNA is Sephardic Jewish.” Following a number of similarly invalid and unreliable statements, he is seen in church, establishing the same knowledge base for members of his flock, exploiting their naiveté (as his was possibly exploited) and effectively leaving them no choice but to redefine themselves as descendants of crypto-Jews.

The program then moved on to use disease as a crypto-Jewish marker. The disease in current vogue is breast cancer, based on mutations in BRCA 1/2; “BRCA” stands for “breast cancer” and 1/2 stands for two genes that normally produce tumor-suppressing proteins in the human body. Because BRCA 1/2 mutations inhibit these proteins, individuals with these mutations are at greater risk of developing breast cancer. The many hundreds of mutations in BRCA 1/2, three have been associated with Ashkenazi (Germanic, east European) Jews. In New Mexico, the discovery of
one or more Ashkenazi mutations in the local Hispanic population is now given as evidence of Sephardi descent by asserting that these mutations emerged before the Ashkenazi-Sephardi split; a way to claim that frequency in one group applies equally to the other. But estimates for the origins of these mutations vary greatly among equally respected geneticists. Some lean toward emergence as late as the twelfth to fourteenth century, long after the Ashkenazi-Sephardi split. More importantly, confidence intervals for the origin of these mutations are so uncertain that no scholar can assert anything conclusive at this time. Thus, the New Mexican assertion—stated as a fact—is only a conjecture. At the same time it ignores the fact that Ashkenazi Jews and Hispanics have been living side by side in New Mexico for roughly 175 years, which means we should expect to find Ashkenazi admixture in the Hispanic gene pool; a modern admixture that does not indicate premodern Sephardi descent.

Estimates vary slightly, but the mutations in question occur among Ashkenazi Jews at roughly 2.5 percent, using the two most recent studies. In the popular view, these mutations are attractive as a Jewish ethnic marker because their frequency in non-Jews is significantly lower, at roughly 0.5 percent. But even though these mutations have a higher frequency among Jews, the non-Jewish population is so enormous, and the Jewish population so tiny, the vast majority of people with these mutations will always be non-Jews. This should not suggest to anyone that these mutations are therefore “Christian” disease markers—such labeling employs the same skewed logic as “Jewish” disease labeling. Rather, these numbers teach us that simply having BRCA 1/2 mutations can tell us nothing—absolute zero—about which population an affected person belongs to, with one exception: given the disproportionate ratio of Jews to non-Jews, there is a roughly 90 percent chance that any American walking into a doctor’s office with BRCA 1/2 mutations is not descended from Jews.

We can see that New Mexico’s naïve, agenda-driven research has labeled “Jewish” three mutations of unknown frequency among Sephardi Jews that do not occur in approximately 98 percent of Ashkenazi Jews. But even more importantly, it overlooks the fact that wherever Jews constitute a minority, no disease shared with non-Jews can ever be used as a Jewish ethnic marker. Since the non-Jewish population will always be so significantly larger in size, the vast majority of affected people will always be non-Jews, even when frequency of the disorder is higher in the Jewish minority.

The Albuquerque news program moved quickly from Father Bill to very briefly quote a geneticist—but just enough to suggest that BRCA 1/2 can be used as a Jewish ethnic marker, instead of making it clear that it cannot be. This was followed by testimony from a Hispanic woman whose family is riddled with disease, her response both reflecting and reinforcing the belief being inculcated in the audience: “That confirmed that we really were Sephardic Jews!”

The focus then turned to the former state historian, spearhead of the crypto-Jewish canon, introduced according to his role as a university professor and author of To the End of the Earth. But rather than contribute academic enlightenment on Mystery Rock or, better yet, on BRCA 1/2, he emphasized with hand gestures what he called “intersecting” claims made on the program that supposedly “coalesce” into evidence of a significant crypto-Jewish settlement in New Mexico: “It’s absolutely fascinating to see the intersection of the historical, and the cultural, and the genetic, and the genealogical that all seem to coalesce”; this, despite the fact that claims of a significant crypto-Jewish settlement are categorically refuted by the historical, cultural, genetic, and genealogical records. “We have an opportunity to save some lives here,” he added, “and that to me is the most exciting part of the whole research.”

But no one explained the excitement of health benefit of inventing demonstrably unfounded, malignant genetic signatures for global Jewry or of convincing non-Jews they descend from Jews based on disease frequencies that show just the opposite. Rather, while this imperial gaze appears innocent—even benevolent in its accompanying rhetoric—it actually redefines all it surveys according to its own agenda, an agenda imposed upon the cultural landscape by sheer power of academic authority and in consistent violation of academic scholarship norms. It is a gaze described by Mary Louise Pratt as that of “he whose imperial eyes look out and possess”; of one who seeks to secure his innocence in the same moment as asserting hegemony, a gaze well-documented in every colonial reconstruction of the history and heritage of subjugated peoples, over time and across space.

It is impossible to estimate the power of media to support demonstrably unfounded and socially menacing assertions that implode identities of whole populations for the benefit of unstated, agenda-driven interests more valued than accuracy. In the news program described—one in a barrage of such programming for more than thirty years—the authority of Church (through the agent of a priest), the authority of Science (through the agent of a geneticist), the authority of State and Academy (through the agency of a state historian and university professor), are all endorsed by the most powerful information-generating institution in the modern world: the news media. The ordinary person—in New Mexico or anywhere else—has no recourse whatsoever.
against such hegemonic authority or its power to redefine an entire people's "historical, and cultural, and genetic, and genealogical" identity—all of these assertions demonstrably unfounded as well as unwarranted by the vast majority of the population being redefined.

As we have seen, New Mexico's crypto-Jewish claims comprise a demonstrably unfounded canon; a reckless foray into ethnographic and genomic research that discredits academia, deals a punishing blow to critical thought, and has contaminated a valuable research site beyond recovery. It snobs multidisciplinary research by assuming anyone trained in the specialties required for specific types of investigation can be replaced by academics unqualified in those areas of specialty. Its social consequences are entirely negative, estranging Hispanic family members and imploding friendships, fraying trust between communities and their supporting institutions (e.g., public schools and mental health facilities), and usurping the Hispanic community's far superior ability to define itself in its own best interest. It has eroded the history and cultural boundaries of Jews and New Mexican Hispanics alike, reviving colonial color-coded racism in the region, and contributing to anti-Semitism. At the same time, it has dealt a daunting blow to Jewish education by diverting much needed Jewish philanthropy from legitimate Jewish causes.

CONCLUSION

What if the twentieth century never happened? What level of academic sophistication would prevail and how would that play out in our best attempts to make genetic and ethnographic sense of the world? If we were to rely on nineteenth century scholars displaced into modern academe—the place where everyone must inevitably turn for accurate information—my best guess is that we would not get accurate information. If the twentieth century never happened, we'd get both Frazer's cultural fiction, and Galton's science fiction. In short, we'd get the crypto-Jewish canon.

We now live in a world of increasingly well-informed, multidisciplinary twenty-first-century specialists, where a nineteenth-century construct like New Mexico's crypto-Jewish canon can only survive at a disturbing level of academic and social dysfunction. No one has ever taken issue with the fact that some small percentage of Hispanics in Spain—as in the American southwest—are likely to have Jewish ancestry. But that is very different from the existence of a significant eighteenth century community of Spanish crypto-Jews, as purportedly evidenced in statewide New Mexican folkways, and in being "Jewish-by-disease." Thus, it should raise concern that a new Sephardic/

Inventing Jewish History, Culture, and Genetic Identity in Modern New Mexico

Crypto-Jewish program at the University of Colorado at Colorado Sprin (UCCS) recently issued the mission statement quoted below. It was emailed to me in 2013 at my request, by the Program Director. The original text includes definitions of Sephardic Jews and crypto-Jews in parentheses, which I've edited out for clarity (my italics): "In particular, this endeavor aims to foster labovative scholarly research on Sephardic Jews and crypto-Jews in the greater Southwest United States and the world."

Like the global academic community, I would welcome any new Prog that generates research according to academic scholarship norms and fieldwise ethics. But a mission statement that explicitly validates a historically and culturally significant settlement of secretly-professing Spanish Jews, for which there is no historical or cultural evidence, and which is refuted by the same gen evidence given to support it, promises to legitimate pseudo-ethnography, science and quack medicine as modern academic scholarship; the legacy of the nineteenth century sophistry as exemplified in the crypto-Jewish canon.

NOTES

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15 Ibid., 55.
17 Ibid., 26.
19 Tomás Atencio, "Crypto-Jewish Remnants in Manito Society and Culture," *Je.
Who is a Jew? Reflections on History, Religion, and Culture

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36 Chavez, *Origin*.

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43 Ibid., 105.
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57 Ibid., 326.
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59 KROE, “Hidden Heritage.”
60 Jo Ann Hackett, Ph.D., Harvard University, email query and response, 2009.
“Jewish Genes”: Ancient Priests and Modern Jewish Identity

Wesley K. Sutton

In most of the world’s religions, changing or abandoning one’s religion means that one is no longer a member of that faith group. Contrary to the norm of other religions, if a person leaves the Jewish religion, one is still usually perceived as being Jewish, especially by the non-Jewish community. Throughout history, Jewish identity has been understood as more than accepting the tenets and observing the traditions of the Jewish religion.

Historically and today, paternal and maternal parentage (one or both) has been used to determine identity as a member of the Jewish people. For this reason, among others, the Jewish people have often been considered a "race," with the explicit biological meaning of that term. Notions of Jews as a biologically distinct group, or a race, have variously been used to establish legal parameters for Jewish identity both by elements in the Jewish community and by non-Jews. The use of the word "tribe" in the context of the Jewish people also has an implicit connotation of relatedness, setting the Jewish people apart from other populations.

In addition, both Jewish and non-Jewish populations have developed, and continue to generate, a multiplicity of folk traditions on "Who is a Jew?" On a more formal basis, scholars have been considering oral traditions, archeology, and historical records in order to answer the same question. Inevitably, these data are often incomplete, unstable over time, and are not always congruent. The recent addition of genetic data to the question of Jewish identity is important and exciting and can add new insights as well as supplement and clarify our understanding.

A critical aspect of these new data, however, is that criteria need to be established for dealing with the inevitable discrepancies between genetic data and previous research based on those oral traditions, archeology, and historical records. The question then arises as to what, or if, genetic data can contribute to questions of Jewish identity.

When genomic science does not support traditional, and often cherished, assumptions, problems may occur in integrating and interpreting these data. Scientists, in the interest of accuracy, strive to gain congruent, scientifically accurate information. But particularly in the larger community, when traditional concepts of Self and Other are challenged by new information from
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