



*Thin Description: Ethnography and the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem.* John L. Jackson Jr., Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013, 404 pp.; reviewed by Miciah Z. Yehudah (Archivist, Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection, Temple University).

In *Thin Description*, John L. Jackson Jr. critiques the traditionally hegemonic position heavily guiding disciplinary ethnography, one that has its adherents to view their accounts as the exclusive authorities on phenomena irrespective of the narratives created by the actual research subjects. Jackson suggests that ethnography should refrain from the Geertzian impulse to offer the authoritative or thick text<sup>1</sup>, and rather, accept the painful but liberating reality that ethnography is only one way to skin the proverbial cat. Hence, Jackson recommends a “thin” description that itself requires thorough analysis, but avoids the arrogant assumption that it could capture everything there is to know about active and living research subjects that are already utilizing multiple methods to document their own experiences. Brilliantly woven into 45 short thematic chapters, the text features everything from Jackson’s thoughts about ethnographic dilemmas such as sincerity, authenticity, and working in an era of globalization, to musings from various members of the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem (AHIJ) regarding their ideas of “divine” business endeavors, immortality, and race.

Here, Jackson’s essential concern is with how the members of AHIJ community utilize various forms of media to propagate their critique and corrective of the encompassing environments, and the extent to which the community’s approach to chronicling their experiences revolved around notions of race and spirituality. He utilizes the case of the AHIJ to display how groups such as these are complicated for scholars, not only for their beliefs, but their interest in and awareness of academic discourse. Rather than waiting to be studied, AHIJ constituents have already begun to study and write on themselves, and have used media to assist in the process, or, in Jackson’s words, mastered the “youtubification” of their experiences<sup>2</sup>. Although Jackson’s text is more a treatment of the question of ethnography than an exhaustive interrogation of the history of the AHIJ it does highlight certain peculiarities.

For example, in Chapter Six (Exiles) Jackson is critical of the notion that ethnographers are conferred some type of legitimacy for being the first to arrive at the field site. Jackson wisely interrogates that notion of pioneer status, questioning what happens when (as in the case of Jackson’s first visit to the community in Dimona, Israel) the Arrival Scene experience is not a solitary experience.<sup>3</sup> Jackson poses another powerful question to challenge that idea of ethnographic legitimacy, when he wonders aloud what it means when other unknown individuals travel with the researcher to experience the same phenomena he is hoping to study.

An additional concern Jackson addressed in his text was the issue of sincerity. In typical ethnographic studies researchers question whether their subjects are responding to prompts with honesty. However, with the more alienated groups, such as the AHIJ, the ethnographer must do more of an “Ethnographic Dance”<sup>4</sup> to assure the research subjects that the study is sincere, even in cases in which the responses appear implausible to the investigator. Throughout the text, this quandary materializes often.

In the chapter “Visitations” Jackson explains how during one of the “sacred visitations” tours, members of the AHIJ tour company seemed to display a “bizarre obliviousness” as a muted television broadcast heightened tensions due to the State of Israel’s ongoing attempt to remove Palestinian settlers from claimed territory.<sup>5</sup> Later in the text, Jackson discussed the AHIJ use of technology under the moniker of “redemptive enterprises”<sup>6</sup> wherein one case, the group attempted to promote a device that would truncate television programs by deleting unnecessary repetitive frames in the broadcast. Their selling point was that in the shortening of the program, more time for advertising would be allowed.

Despite the obvious brilliance displayed by the AHIJ in the conceptualization of such a device, it is possible that Jackson, in an effort to appear sincere, overlooked the opportunity to extend the discussion further, as to what their actions may have implied in the larger scheme of things. For example, in the case of the “sacred visitation” tours, he might have done well in asking what it meant for the AHIJ to display a certain disinterest and apathy towards the events transpiring in the region, even when it forced them to shift their tour to a different location. Especially given the urgency and immediacy indicated in the reports, it would have been enlightening as to what had them to ignore the pending event to the extent that visitors may have been put in danger. Jackson lets on to this point but withdraws prematurely. Secondly, with regards to the AHIJ’s “redemptive enterprises”, Jackson may have interrogated what the initiative truly said about their intentions, when on one hand they claimed to be against the “Euro-Gentile” (Western) system and its power to usurp and define, but on the other hand were willing to offer technologies that would have allowed the same usurping Western media an increased ability to influence public opinions. In both cases, the issue of sincerity was noticeable, and more insight into the dilemma might have been forthcoming with a more extensive interrogation.

On the topic of ethnography Jackson thrived. In fact, a major strength of *Thin Description* rests in his powerful critique of traditional ethnography, specifically his rejection of its constant need to pen the thick description and proclaim itself as the King of the research enterprise. Situating most of his analyses from the groundbreaking arguments in Lewis Gordon’s *Disciplinary Decadence*<sup>7</sup>, Jackson excels in making the potent case that within ethnography nothing should be off limits, and that one needs not be linked to a college campus in order to do ethnography. An additional strength of Jackson’s work is in his ability to allow the narrative to flow without too much of an in-depth critique.

Although this type of ethnographic approach (Jackson frames it as a type of Ethnographic dance) has certain drawbacks as previously discussed, it effectively allowed Jackson to purportedly remove himself from the picture, serving as only a vehicle for the research subject to speak. This is important, since earlier researchers on the AHIJ community and other people of African descent practicing Hebraic traditions<sup>8</sup> have found ways to marginalize both AHIJ narratives in addition to the members' intellectual capabilities.

Throughout the text, as promised, Jackson successfully reported on the various forms of media utilized by the AHIJ, including their Youtube channels, documentaries from their own film endeavors, their various pamphlets, and the redemptive device that actually extended other enterprise's opportunities to advertise on television. However, throughout the text, his pursuit to appear sincere in many cases consumed any potentiality of extending the discourse, having him to miss out on asking some of the more critical questions of race and spirituality. His insistence on viewing the AHIJ as "tricksters"<sup>9</sup> and a group engaging in a "type of lying"<sup>10</sup> in the Henry Louis Gates signifying tradition, without neither the circumstantial evidence to support the claim nor so much of an explanation as to how he draws the parallel, almost suggests that the AHIJ account is good only for purposes of indulgence, and not for its ability to impact racial, religious and geographical trajectories. Such a treatment that avoids any discussion of the obvious concerns of race, out of fear that it may be taken by other scholars of "traditional" disciplines as non-intellectual due to the flawed general assumption that it oversaturates the discussion with racial issues even when race is a (if not the) critical theme (especially in the case of a group that refers to itself as "African"), may actually do the very thing it seeks not to do: appease traditional disciplinary limitations, all the while projecting a sort of minstrelization of a group that has already faced challenges of recognition in academia.

Aside from ethnographic inquiry, Jackson levies a passionate critique of what he terms as Afrocentrism. In his treatment of its alleged shortcomings when applied to the case of the AHIJ, Jackson frequently mislabels the mode of intellectual inquiry as "Afrocentrism," unreservedly applies the label of Orientalist to its theoretical forebear, suggests that its treatment of race and phenomena is generally excessive<sup>11</sup>, and rashly suggests that scholars employing African centered or Afrocentric Inquiry (or whatever additional mode of inquiry falls under what Jackson refers to as Afrocentrism) engage their research subjects and derive assumptions and lines of inquiry from the same generalized launching points that he assumes them to be.<sup>12</sup> Regrettably, the critique, situated in an understanding of Afrocentrism, was more of what James Stewart would label as a pop-culturesque idea of Afrocentric inquiry<sup>13</sup>, and was unsuccessful in offering any substantial data by which readers could weigh his claims. Jackson's interrogation of the parameters of Afrocentric Inquiry would have been further enhanced if he probed the specific ways the paradigm's utilization may have either extended or diminished the potent possibilities of the research topic.

For example, he may have questioned what it actually meant for the self-identified African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem to (1) identify simultaneously as Hebrews and Africans, (2) claim a solidarity with other Africans in a world divided along racial lines, and (3) assess the contribution their own efforts made (or are making) to historic and contemporary Pan-African struggle. Queries such as these posed by Black Studies specialists tend to bridge the often rigid disciplinary bounds of traditional history, psychology, geography, political science, and ethnography, whereas in those cases in which race is addressed, the research effort is neither limited nor handicapped.

Despite its few shortcomings, *Thin Description* is a valiant attempt to address the very legitimate contentions that many scientific purists have with ethnography and the larger academic project, specifically the condition that one's work is legitimate or authoritative only when one has created the sole or most sizable account. As more groups and individuals unbound by the rules of academia consciously take on the task of documenting their own experiences they should neither be viewed as existing in a time trap, nor should their narratives and intellectual abilities be assumed as secondary to what an independent researcher perceives or projects. Jackson's apprehension and warning of a disciplinary degeneration is well founded, thus, scholars of all academic disciplines should take note of his counsel.

## Endnotes

1. Jackson, John L. *Thin Description: Ethnography and the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013, 152.
2. Jackson, *Thin Description*, 89.
3. Ibid., 48.
4. Ibid., 93.
5. Ibid., 126.
6. Ibid., 175.
7. Gordon, Lewis. *Disciplinary Decadence: Living thought in trying times*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers. 2006.

8. In addition to the newspaper coverage that had all but refused to engage the AHJ narrative, academic coverage has attempted to suggest that the group's initiatives since the 1960s were either cultic (without much critical thought) or motivated by their hopes of seeking acceptance in the larger white world. See Gerber, Rabbi Israel. *The Heritage Seekers: American Blacks in search of Jewish identity*. Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publisher, 1977, Markowitz, Fran. "Israel as Africa, Africa as Israel: 'Divine Geography' in the Personal Narratives and Community Identity of the Black Hebrew Israelites" *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 69. No. 4, 193-205 (Oct. 1996), Markowitz, Fran. "Finding the Past, Making the Future: The African Hebrew Israelite Community's Alternative to the Black Diaspora" Chapter 6 in Gomez, Michael A. (ed.) *Diasporic Africa: A Reader*. New York and London New York University Press. 2006, 123-146, Markowitz, Fran, Helman, Sara, and Shir Vertesh, Dafna. "Soul Citizenship: The Black Hebrews and the State of Israel" *American Anthropologist*. New Series. Vol. 1105. No. 2. 302-312 (June 2003) and Singer, Charles Merrill. *Saints of the Kingdom. Group emergence, Individual affiliation, and social change among the Black Hebrews of Israel*. (Doctoral Dissertation) University of Utah, Utah. 1979.

9. Jackson, Thin Description, 289.

10. Ibid., 290.

11. Ibid., 310.

12. Ibid., 163-174.

13. Peters, Erskine. "Afrocentricity: Problems of Method and Nomenclature" in Nathaniel Norment Jr.'s *The African American Studies Reader*. Durham: North Carolina Press, (1993) 2001, 565-584.

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