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THE SEARCH FOR THE JEW'S GENE: SCIENCE, SPECTACLE, AND THE ETHNIC OTHER

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“I am not interested in determining the line between ‘real’ and ‘fabled’ aspects of the Jew. This can be done only by ignoring the fact that all aspects of the Jew, whether real or invented, are the locus of difference.”

—Sander Gilman (1991, p. 2)

“Once described as ‘a sort of British Indiana Jones,’ University of London scholar Tudor Parfitt, in this interview with NOVA producer David Espar, recounts his fascinating odyssey on behalf of the Lemba. A southern African tribe with tantalizing claims to an ancient Jewish heritage, the Lemba dispatched Parfitt on a journey of discovery that would take him halfway across Africa and into a remote desert valley in southern Arabia, where he stumbled upon what he believes may be the lost city of the Lemba.”

—*The Sons of Abraham*¹

Introduction

This paper considers the collision of spectacle, science, and racial-ethnic identifications in the contemporary scientific search for a “Jewish gene.” It aims not so much to distinguish the “line between ‘real’ and ‘fabled’ aspects of the Jew” (as cited in the passage by Gilman above), but to consider the inextricability of both as composite elements, mutually constituting “difference” as racial-ethnic identification. Thus I am concerned with the

¹ See www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/israel/parfitt.html, from Chris Hale (dir.), *The Sons of Abraham: The Search for the Jewish Gene* [screened as *To the Ends of the Earth*, Channel 4, United Kingdom, 15 March 1999] PBS/NOVA.

specular² economies of science as well as the knowledge capital of its mediatization as they come together, troubled, over the Jew's body. The essay takes as its case study the National Geographic (NOVA/PBS) television documentary, *The Sons of Abraham*, a film that follows the progress of anthropologist Tudor Parfitt through the Lemba communities of South Africa in a quest to obtain genetic evidence in order to authenticate (or falsify) their claims to Jewish identity.

My discussion will aim to situate an emergent science of what may be termed "ethnic [or cultural] identity genetics" against a number of historical as well as contemporary resonances. The first of these is the use of a (post)colonial popular imaginary as the lens through which bodies and cultural identities may be taxonomised. Of particular interest in this context is the revivification of racial science as a legitimate and desired site of human classification. A second arena of resonance concerns the implications arising from a fascination specifically with Jewish bodies in a post-Holocaust world, and with black bodies against a history of colonial eugenic science. Here, questions of bodily governance are central, evoking both a complex (and often understood as "tainted") history of eugenic (sexual-racial) regulation effected by the state and by medicine, and the profound forms of abjection and prurience that have historically attended the stigmatised bodies and identities of racial science.³ Third is the question of representation and the place of spectacle and desire in the sedimentation of scientific ideas, in this instance genetics (and historically, eugenics), into popular idiom and wider cultural commonsense. As this paper will argue, all of these themes are articulated on a terrain in which racial-sexual knowledges are deployed through representational as well as scientific economies, and through regimes of desire as well as bodies of knowledge.

This paper will not provide an elaborated examination of the scientific validity of the claimed finding of a Jewish gene. This is of course an interesting question in its own right but is beyond the scope of the analysis I wish to forge. Here, I am concerned with the question of a "Jewish gene" as *truth*, as distinct

² I refer here to Luce Irigaray's theory of the "specular" which offers a re-theorisation of the relationship between gender order and the symbolic. My use of the term here makes an analogy between the phallogocentric symbolic (described by Irigaray) and the racial imaginary. Both are articulations of visibility and embodiment, in which visibility and touch are imbricated in regimes of gender—or as Irigaray proposes, "light and touch" (Irigaray 1985; see also Zaikin 1999).

³ The intersection of race and sexuality can be said to accrue per se to the theoretical ideas and historical practices of eugenics (see for example: Mort 1987; Proctor 1988; Davis 1990; Steinberg 1997) and colonial science (see Schiebinger 2004).

from the question of a “Jewish gene” as *fact*—a key point to which this paper will return in the concluding discussion. I begin from the proposition (and will trace the ways in which) the spectacle of science is not simply an epiphenomenal artefact, tacked on to “real science,” but is, rather, part of the epistemic core of scientific cultures and scientific work.⁴ Thus, discussion of a site in which spectacle and science explicitly come together tells us something about *both*.

My discussion below begins by introducing the key concepts and media-based analytic strategies as they are taken up in this paper. This will include a brief consideration of documentary genre and the value of social semiotic analysis for an understanding of the question of genes in popular culture. I shall also discuss the particular form of media study I take up here, which brings together feminist traditions of semiotic analysis, an extension of the Foucauldian notion of cultural *episteme*, and psychoanalytic concepts of the “gaze” and the role of phantasy. I shall then turn to the documentary itself, unpacking the intersecting repertoires of meaning—spectacular, semiotic, and narrative—that attach to and constitute the Jew’s body and the Jew’s gene, as well as the scientific enterprise of “identity genetics.” Here I shall consider the ways in which *The Sons of Abraham* resonates with and attempts to recast historical imageries and ideas that attached to earlier periods of eugenic science, including the abjecting discourses that accrued to nineteenth-century ideas about African bodies and twentieth-century classifications of the Jew’s body.

The paper will conclude by taking up the questions of fantasy (and phantasy) to consider the affective dimensions of both science and its mediatised spectacle. Here I shall speculate on the underpinning economies of attachment that may help to explain both the extraordinarily uncritical reiteration of racial science represented in this particular genetic experiment (and its mediatised representation), as well as the growing popularity and apparent purchase of racial-sexual identity genetics itself.

Race, Sexual Science, and the Social Semiotic Field

Central to this paper are several methodological questions: By what means do we gain purchase on the power relations and seductions of biomedical discourses? What are the processes we aim to theorise in this context in order to begin to explain the forms bio-power may take, the modes through which the

⁴ In this sense, my discussion does have bearing on the question of scientific validity as it considers the, as we shall see, problematic premises that underpin the biological taxonomisation of the search for a Jewish gene.

products and processes of biomedical discourse are regulated and reproduced (or challenged), and the particular attractions they seem to embody? As I note above, my discussion of *The Sons of Abraham* and the scientific quest for a “Jewish gene” draws together three themes: the field of visual representation; the question of epistemology, that is, the field of knowledge and the regimes that produce what may be knowable; and the question of affectivity, that is, the feeling structures underpinning regimes of knowledge and power that seduce (or repel) and guide our attachments (and resistances) to particular forms of knowledge.

The analytic approach of this paper draws its impetus from a tradition of feminist semiotics, namely, the study of signification⁵ informed by a particular focus on the complex articulations of gender, sexuality, race, and class (among other key social relations) as they constitute a *field of signification*. Such approaches are concerned with repertoires of meaning effected by various means, including visual, generic, discursive, and narrational. An important strand of this tradition is interested in the nexus of social and semiotic practices, that is, in the relationship between representation and material relations.⁶ In this context, the documentary form takes on particular resonance. In her early work, Pratiba Parmar (1987) has argued that the documentary is a genre of visual culture whose particular capital is “truth.” Documentary convention is, in this sense, a conceit not only of realism as a genre style, but paradoxically, a media form that purports to offer *unmediated* facts. As such it is a genre form that stands at the fulcrum between the spectacle and the social. Documentary convention embodies (even as its conventions obscure) the influence of the material conditions and context of its production, as well as the consequentialities of its terms of representation.

Documentary, moreover, has a distinctive role in the mediation of scientific work and popular commonsense at a number of levels. Media and popular representation are, for example, central avenues through which the largely closed professional circles of scientific ideas become available to and sedimented through the wider culture. At the same time, the way that scientific work is representationally framed suggests something not only about the role and power of media industries, but also about the objects of their representation. In this context, *The Sons of Abraham* (as with other comparable

⁵ I refer here to Barthes’s (1972) understanding of making “signs” (linguistic and visual) as a locus and avenue of cultural meaning-making. Feminist semiotics has taken this up with particular interest in the gender politics of signification—as both an interpretive field and a site of meaning consumption as well as production.

⁶ For more extended discussion of social semiotic analysis and its concern with the “materialities of signification,” see Epstein and Steinberg (2007).

programming) is of particular interest because it represents a moment of overt nexus between scientific work (it documents an experiment in progress) and the work of popular representation (it is a mediated spectacle). In *The Sons of Abraham*, as we shall see, we are presented with an explicit interplay, on the one hand, of a scientific agency taking up the role of cultural authorship, and on the other, of a framing of scientific work itself with reference to popular ideas.

A linked strand of feminist media studies is concerned with the question of attachment, that is, the affective dimensions of both textual encoding and audience engagement. Theories of spectacle, and in particular, Laura Mulvey's (1988) seminal concept of "the (male) gaze," point up the ways in which visual cultures effect meanings through the mediation of feeling—particularly, Mulvey suggests, through a patriarchally inflected mode of desire. In this context, Mulvey theorised visual representation⁷ as a site of conflictive subject-object relations, articulated through the voyeuristic pleasures of "looking" as well as the unconscious identifications of phantasy. Following this, she has suggested that visual representation, organised through a predominating "male gaze," provides a window onto the patriarchal unconscious of the culture that produced it. Another way of understanding this is to suggest that visual representations both constitute and reflect the cultural *episteme* (that is, the *conditions of possibility of knowledge* as well as its consequences). An account of spectacle—the feeling structures imbricated within and through spectacle—thus fills out our understanding of the relationship of the semiotic to the social. As I shall argue, *The Sons of Abraham* does not simply present a popularised *account* of a scientific experiment, but in so doing elaborates a realm of desire and phantasy that, together, transforms the advent of a new form of racial-sexual science into both an object of desire as well as an object of plausible knowledge.

A final and related point with respect to media analysis refers to what might be termed the "filling-in" function which, along with spectacle, plays a part in forging what might be termed the *affective-epistemic contract* between film and film-viewer. To a significant degree, cinematic signification deals in narrative and semiotic *fragments* which are then *filled in* by the viewer. This is one way of defining the notion of *popular* in the context of representation: the more recognisable the fragment (the more commonsense it is), the more easily

⁷ While Mulvey was specifically concerned to theorise cinematic representation, I would suggest that her work has resonance and application for the theorisation of visual representation in a more general sense.

the audience can *fill in* the rest.⁸ A documentary which aims to bring the more or less unfamiliar (genetic experimentation, in this instance) into the realm of popular understanding involves an interplay of the as-yet-unspelled-out with the already-familiar (cultural repertoires that do not require spelling out). An examination of signifying *tropes* (those encapsulated frames of representation that are suggestive of larger stories or ideas) provides a useful mechanism to gauge not only the terms of congruence forged between arcane and available knowledges, but also the terms of investment. If there are prurient pleasures attached to voyeuristic spectacle, there are also epistemic satisfactions attached to (the quest for) knowing. As we shall see, *The Sons of Abraham* is interesting not simply for the ways in which its spectacle might eroticise race, but also for its mutual terms of invitation between the popular and the expert.

“The Sons of Abraham”

Scene 1: Land Rover Sequence

A Land Rover comes into shot. It is driven by a tall, casually dressed white man, Tudor Parfitt, who, we already know, is an anthropologist working with a genetic research team at University College London. His attire is Western, with a button-down shirt tucked neatly into jeans. The landscape is a dusty, African wilderness, with parched land and hot sun, the occasional tree, and no discernible landmarks. As the Land Rover progresses, the driver glances periodically at a torn scrap of paper which he holds in one hand, muttering audibly under his breath about the difficulties of following this evidently hand-drawn map. A sequence of five shots follows: we see the Land Rover going forward out of shot. The scene cuts and we see the Land Rover doubling back, driving again out of shot. The scene cuts to the Land Rover driving left, then doubling back again to the right. Finally, it heads back again toward the viewer.

Scene 2: DNA Swab Sequence

The setting is outdoors at night, with a visible moon. The scientist who had been driving the Land Rover in the previously described sequence is

⁸ I would suggest that this quality of “filling-in” as a mode of relationship as well as a measure of commonsense accrues to *narrative* form and perhaps also to other forms of linguistic utterance, such as theoretical analysis or performatives. I would include in this formulation modes of visual narrative, and perhaps musical genres as they are incorporated into visual narrative. This take on the process of affective attachment as well as on plausible indices for a notion of the “popular” does not necessarily work if we consider examples such as music (apart from associations with visual narrative) or still-framed artistic renderings, such as painting.

now seated at a table, with scientific instruments laid out. He is wearing surgical gloves. There is a group of African men waiting patiently. Each one steps forward and the scientist takes a swab from his cheek. The scientist then poses each man for a photograph. In the midst of this process, the scientist comments jokingly to one man that he must be careful not to mix his “Welsh genes” with their “Lemba genes.”

There are a number of observations one might discern from these two scenes. The first is that both are obviously staged, and this staging is set up around a “catch” intended to drive particular and recognisable narratives. The Land Rover sequence offers a visual “play” on a trope of African “backwardness,” a place without proper maps, where resources remain untapped or wasted by its own inhabitants, requiring the introjection of a Western outsider to trace discernible paths, and whose own imposing and well-heeled presence provides a counterpoint and comment. Against this backdrop, the Land Rover itself seems to evoke both the safari suit and the rifle of a previous era, offered here as the late modern accoutrement of colonial adventure and rugged science. Likewise, in the DNA swab sequence, the unlikely use of moonlight to conduct a scientific experiment invokes an air of mystery and adds a certain rough uncivilisedness to the proceedings. Over the public swabbing and photographing of African men hovers the shadow of an earlier era of such photography, in which African men and women were posed, holding measuring devices against their skulls, the paraded curiosities of a Victorian racial imaginary.

Both of these scenes appear in the Channel 4 (PBS/NOVA) documentary *The Sons of Abraham: The Search for the Jewish Gene*.⁹ The film is structured around two parallel narrative trajectories. The first is the story of a scientific mission led by anthropologist and linguist, Tudor Parfitt, to seek genetic evidence in order to authenticate or to falsify the claim to Jewish identity of the Lemba community in South Africa. Specifically, Parfitt and his team were interested in determining whether male members of the Lemba community carry the “Kohanim gene” that is a purported patrilineal genetic

⁹ This documentary appears to have more than one version, depending on where it was broadcast. In the United Kingdom, it was first broadcast on Channel 4, on 15 March 1999, under the title *To the Ends of the Earth*. It thereafter appeared on multiple occasions for the cable National Geographic Channel. It is also available on VHS (NTSC, USA format only) and can be purchased through NOVA. This essay is based on transcriptions I myself made from the original British broadcast; another version of the transcript (with a slightly different introductory scene) appears on the NOVA website at www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/transcripts/2706israel.html. It is noted on this website that the USA version was broadcast on PBS on 22 February 2000.

marker of the Kohan line.¹⁰ In this endeavour, the camera follows Parfitt's journey through South Africa to take DNA samples from various Lemba communities. This scientific journey is both narratively and visually cast through genre conventions of adventure. Here, two quintessentially masculine versions of the genre are brought together, emphasising on the one hand the rugged heroism required of (scientific) exploration in a dangerous field, and on the other, the unassuming masculinity of the English scientific gentleman, displaced from the otherwise unspectacular mundanity of laboratory life in London. Parfitt's visual distinction from the "natives" presents as a forceful and continuing motif. It is elaborated by his singular whiteness against sequential collectivities of black bodies; a style of casual dress that both concedes to and yet does not "fit" the rough landscapes over which he travels; his class distinction articulated through an educated British accent; and a style of unassuming and yet entirely taken for granted authority—the "rightness" of this quest is a premise of his presence, rather than an entreaty or a justification that he must submit.¹¹

The scientific quest narrative is paralleled by a second storyline: Parfitt's quest to retrace the Lemba exodus story, the story of their migration from a land called Sena. Thus, Parfitt's travels through Africa to gather Lemba DNA are framed and effected through a reverse travelogue of sorts. This, too, is an authentication quest, this time to map empirically a mythology central to Lemba identity. In this context, Sena is presented as a metaphor of bodily lineage: both are "mythologies" of origin and identity; both are framed as unevidenced "oddities" requiring explanation.

¹⁰ Kohanim refers to the descendents of Aaron (of the Levite tribe) and, more specifically, those of a "priestly" lineage and status who served in the Tabernacle. While both males and females can be descendents of Kohanim, the priestly status is patrilineal. Women were not permitted to perform the Kohanim rites and responsibilities in the Temple. (Thus the Kohanim status stands in distinction from those classifications of Jewish heritage and identity that are defined matrilineally).

¹¹ In a telling scene, midway through the film, Parfitt is "held up" by one of the Lemba communities he visits as they inform him that they wish to consider whether they are prepared to give him the samples for which he has come. Parfitt betrays evident impatience and is heard to mutter in an aside comment that "...he [the community leader who is taking his time over this] is not quite sober." The description of the hesitation of the community is described as a "tribal" sensibility. Because it is presented through Parfitt's point of view, it carries the inevitable connotations attached to the "primitive" African in the face of the civilised European. The guiding presumption, played out in this scene, is one of obligation on the part of the Lemba; this follows from the logic of a narrative that demands Parfitt's success in getting what he needs. The Lemba are both visually and narratively presented as recalcitrant figures (and figuratives) in direct contrast to Parfitt's embodied (and entitled) knower.

V/O¹² Tudor will trace the Lemba train northwards, armed with a genetic sampling kit from the lab. He will try to discover the lost city of Sena. And by taking samples as he travels, he may solve the puzzle of who the Lemba are. And where they come from.

[cut to Land Rover]

Sena is described in epic and romantic terms. It is a “lost” Eden, a mythic seat of the origins of humanity itself, a primordial object of desire. Interestingly, it is left absent in the sequence of the film. The particular mythology of Sena is never elaborated, only cited as the film progresses. The vast landscapes that appear—at times of Africa as “dark continent,” at others of Arabic lands—seem virtually interchangeable. These are only notional citations of land, imbued with mystery and an imperative to believe. As tropes of religious signification, the indeterminate but insistent imagery of the search for Sena imbues the science with a “higher” order of desire figured as the stuff of faith. Sena thus frames the putative “facts” of the Lemba with an aura of larger “truth,” and a projective desire to *believe in* both the Lemba as locus of human meaning itself, and in genetics as a means by which we might grasp it.

At the same time, the notion that Sena is an implausible, and likely unfindable, place parallels the implicit (though no less powerful for that) initial premise of the experiment: that the Lemba are bodily implausible Jews. In both contexts, it is Parfitt, rather than the Lemba communities themselves, who is vested with the necessary authority to define what counts as evidence and what may be made of it.¹³

The characterisation of evidence emergent here is, itself, striking at a number of levels and emblematised in a scene where Parfitt interviews a Lemba leader about Sena, commenting:

T I was very moved by William. He was clearly very convinced by his story and is genuine in his belief that he’s Jewish and his people are of Jewish extraction. And it’s interesting he keeps talking about this Sena, this Sena myth, this Sena legend and the story of the Lemba. But it’s difficult to see how he can know that. I’m not convinced by this biblical evidence.

¹² In what follows, **V/O** = voiceover; **T** = Tudor Parfitt; **L** = member of Lemba Community.

¹³ One might note also that the notion applied here, that an ethnic/religious mythology must be empirically proven in order for the identity itself to be valid, would invalidate all religious claims. This is precisely the irreconcilable distinction between scientific and religious epistemology. While both constitute “truth regimes,” they are imbricated in radically divergent orders of “truth,” knowledge, and materiality. This application *ad absurdum* of a scientific method to what may well be an allegorical account, referencing but not describing a religious heritage, entwines with the racialised economies of the documentary, which are premised on a presumption of invalidity that is much more globally attributed to the Lemba.

Here we see the slippage of defining agency from “native” to expert. It is Parfitt who is the definitive “I” in this formulation, the “I” who *must be convinced* in order that the claims under discussion may be deemed authentic. The underpinning presumption that the Lemba are *unfit*¹⁴ asserts a motif that will be reiterated throughout *The Sons of Abraham*.¹⁵

Ab-Origine

These underpinning premises of the film with respect to its key figures, its science, and its narrational and visual trajectories are set out graphically in the film’s opening sequence:

Jerusalem

[wide angle: wailing wall: roving shots of Jewish worshippers and blowing of shofar]

V/O History dealt harshly with the people of Israel. Over centuries, they were scattered to the four corners of the Earth. Many simply vanished. They became known as the lost tribes. The mystery of what happened to the lost tribes of Israel has haunted the human imagination ever since.

[cue programme title: SEARCH FOR THE JEWISH GENE]

Sintamule, South Africa

V/O Thousands of miles from Israel, in Southern Africa, live the Lemba people. They believe that their roots go back to ancient Judaea.

[shot of unidentified man from Lemba community]

L1 The Lemba are Jews. We are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the rest of them all. These are our blood relatives.

¹⁴ The imputation of “unfitness” seems to carry two intersecting constructions of the Lemba. One is that they are *unable* to authenticate their own identifications—both by reason of lack of necessary expertise and knowledges—and another, related construction, that they are *unwilling* to do so. This latter is implicit in the ceding of self-definitional authority to Parfitt as well as the oft noted perplexity that the Lemba lack the curiosity to pinpoint geographically the location of Sena. This of course begs the question as to why a biblical mythology must be empirically validated in order that the identities associated with it be deemed to have authenticity.

¹⁵ Once again, even as it establishes a “higher order” of desire, the conceit that Sena itself must be empirically located is, of course, rather odd and absurd given that religious mythologies by definition constitute a faith-based episteme that is not reconcilable with scientific understandings or methods of knowledge.

V/O Their lives for the most part are traditionally African. *But* the Lemba have customs which *could* connect them with the Jews. They follow the strict dietary rules that were laid down by Moses. They eat only kosher food. All blood has to be drained from animals before they're fit for consumption. [original emphasis]

Soweto, Johannesburg

[shot of Tudor Parfitt, tall, white, with educated British accent, welcomed by Lemba]

T Good afternoon.

V/O Tudor Parfitt is an anthropologist and linguist who's investigated **claims** to Jewish origins all over the world. Many diverse peoples from Jerusalem to Japan **claim** to be descended from the ancient Israelites. **It may be a need to belong rather than reality**, but after many years spent recording the Lemba's oral history and customs, Tudor has begun to share **their extraordinary belief**. [emphasis mine]

[cue: Tudor Parfitt in the centre of group of Lemba]

T You're called the black Jews. Do you *really* think you are black Jews? [original emphasis]

[cue: a second unidentified Lemba man]

L2 I believe that I am a black Jew. Because we don't eat pork and the Jews also doesn't eat pork. There was these marriages who don't [unclear] marry of different nationalities. It must also be of a Lemba tribe. And whenever we slaughter we wash our hands with care as well as the utensils. To eat kosher food, they clean all the utensils, they clean their hands and so on. And that means everything is clean.

[cue: community gathering in large square addressed by Lemba leader; background voice counterpoint to voiceover, of translator—not in shot—who explains leader's speech in English]

V/O In modern day Soweto, the Lemba are determined to preserve their Jewish identity. Their leaders remind them that Africa was not their original homeland. They tell of a journey across the sea from a place somewhere in the North called Sena.

Translator We started from Sena. Then we get to Sena 2, Sena 3...

V/O Today, no Lemba knows exactly where Sena is or was. **In spite of their passionate belief** that they are Jews, **Tudor** has had no means to prove or disprove their claims ... [pause] ... **until now**.¹⁶

In this opening sequence, we see the conjoining, both through narrative structure and generic (linguistic and visual) repertoire, of imperial and scientific adventure. What is set out is a scientist on a mission to a “dark continent” where he meets reluctant, childlike natives who do not understand their land or its natural resources and so their lives are marginal and poor. It is for the scientist, who embodies the contrasting nature of a civilised, resourceful, and knowing West, to make use of these resources, to mine what is subterranean, to define what is amorphous, and to develop what has been left untended in the desert. In this context, it is the scientific narrative that transforms the journey to find Sena into an appropriative and territorializing modus through which the Lemba become objects, rather than subjects, of their own history. At the same time, these two journeys, one to mine DNA and one to retrace the road to a mythical place of origin, are offered as redemptive, transvalued quests—this time ostensibly to restore rather than plunder, to offer goods rather than to appropriate, to authenticate rather than to devalue, to right the wrongs of an earlier imperialism.

A constellation of unsustainable premises accrue to this understanding of bodies and to genetic knowledges of bodies. By both scientific and filmic convention we are asked to take a number of things on faith. For example, embedded in the quest for a “Kohanim gene” is a prior assumption that cultural identity carries (and can be reducible to) a biological marker that can be—and this is the second assumption—scientifically pinpointed and accurately traced. It is a presumption rather than an argument—of both the science and of the documentary tracing it—that genetics can tell us something about Jewish identity, who is a Jew, how it is passed along, and what it means. The positing of an indexical Jewish gene against which claimants to the identity can be measured rests on two further assumptions. One is that the Jew and the Kohanim constitute empirically coherent categorisations¹⁷—an assumption that rests on still another presumption—that of the “unbrokenness” of reproductive relations and kinship from Jew to Jew, from Kohen father to Kohen son. A

¹⁶ This excerpt is taken from the British version of *The Sons of Abraham*, screened as *To the Ends of the Earth* on Channel 4, on 15 March 1999. Italics indicate original emphasis, bold print indicates my emphasis.

¹⁷ In actual fact, Jewish history is a history of conversion into and out of Jewish identities.

related presumption is that the Lemba, as a people, constitute an “undiluted” culture, back to their “primitive” roots. Terminologies of “mystery” and “lost tribes” juxtaposed with haunting, stark landscapes and references to the human imagination itself evoke an epic antiquity and the profound power of an encounter with the slender and inchoate remnants of humanity itself. It is perhaps worth adding that the idea that exact paternity, particularly back into antiquity, can either be *known* or can be *assumed to have followed a linear descent* for the purpose of the experiment seems an extraordinary one, given what we know about the realities of human sexuality and kinship.

Anthropomorphism and Ethnic Capital: The Jew’s Body and the African “Other”

The notion of a “throwback,” in-bred culture, was a characteristic object of early anthropological fascination as well as of early genetics and it was not incidental that such researches focused on racialised “oddities” of under- (and sometimes über-) class.¹⁸ As Trinh Minh-ha (1982) has suggested, the anthropological gaze is one characterised by overtones of anthropomorphism (that is, a gaze on the primitive as not-quite-human), hence its association with the zoologically focused tropes of Natural History. Here the Lemba are figured at once as the repositories of human origins and as quintessential outsiders, objects in need of explanation, rather than subjects who may, and have standing to, explain themselves without having the *necessity* of doing so. Moreover the African context for such investigation is as familiar, indeed is a veritable cliché, as is the instrumentation (swab, camera, latex glove, rough-hewn tables by moonlight), discussed above, of (post)colonial cultural taxonomy and its imbrication in a eugenic racial imaginary.

The Jew as Mongrel Body

In his 1991 study, *The Jew’s Body*, Sander Gilman examines the highly charged characterisations of Jewish identity in the history of racial science. This history is in part located in the nineteenth century, where the Jew’s body emerged as an ambivalent figuration against imperative investments in the notion of definitive racial lines between white and black peoples. As a people whose perceived insistence on their difference jarred with the assimilative logic of the emergent modern state, Jews became figures of debased whiteness, and the Jew’s body, the object of prurient fascination. It was in this context that the Jew was cast as “swarthy,” defined as a “mongrel” race—the depraved product

¹⁸ For discussion of the fascination of early genetics through the simultaneously classed and sexualised fetishisations of Victorian eugenics, see for example, Mort (1987).

of interbreeding of white and its reviled Other, African.¹⁹ Gilman cites the example of the “Hottentot” who were seen to emblemise the animality, danger, and intrinsic depravity attributed to Africans as an “ugly” race (p. 173). As “hybridised blacks,” Jews too were understood as members of the “ugly races.” These prurient characterisations in turn formed ideological centres, the latter rationalising, among other things, the slave trade, and the former underpinning the eugenics movements of the early twentieth century—which culminated in the genocidal catastrophe of the Holocaust.²⁰ Against this background, the Lemba people, as Africans and Jews both, stand as ethnic Others at the interstices of two intersecting racial taxonomic traditions. Their presence, both as objects of genetic-ethnic experiment and as spectacle, cannot but carry the resonances of such earlier associations.

The Lemba Body

V/O Tudor Parfitt is an anthropologist and linguist who’s investigated claims to Jewish origins all over the world. Many diverse peoples from Jerusalem to Japan claim to be descended from the ancient Israelites. It may be a need to belong rather than reality, but after many years spent recording the Lemba’s oral history and customs, Tudor has begun to share their extraordinary belief.

T You’re called the black Jews. Do you *really* think you are black Jews?

In the logic of the documentary (and arguably, of the science it tracks), the Lemba are *axiomatically* implausible Jews. Proceeding from this premise is an extensive language of disqualification that disinvests the Lemba as claiming subjects and locates trustworthy explanation in the educated authority of white European science. As emblematised in the passages above, the Lemba self-definition as a Jewish community is cast with the language of suspicion: it is a “claim,” an “extraordinary belief”; they “have customs which *could* connect them with the Jews”; “do [they] *really* think [they] are black Jews?” Implicit in this language is a construction of a credulous and abject people: the comment that “it may be a need to belong rather than reality” is suggestive of a self-denying (but presumably understandable) plea from the marginal “low” for distinction above their station.

¹⁹ The sexualised voyeurism embedded in this discourse is graphically evident in the example of Sarah Bartmann (the “Hottentot Venus”) whose prurient display was emblematic of the repudiative imaginary of Victorian racial ideology, articulated through a nexus of science and spectacle. See Gilman (1985) and Holmes (2006).

²⁰ For further discussion of the racial-scientific underpinnings of twentieth-century eugenics and the eugenic and genocidal practices of National Socialism, see also Lifton (1986) and Proctor (1988).

At the empirical centre of this representational economy are bodies (and identifications) that do not “fit.” The Lemba are expressly posited as implausible Jews *because* they are black. This premise is linguistically grounded through the use of “black” as a qualifier for “Jew.” Moreover the “Africanness” of the Lemba is, throughout the documentary, visually and discursively staged in negatory terms: the Lemba people “perform Jew,”²¹ but the performance is somehow “not right”; their origin story is “unfamiliar” and “odd”; their practices are not strictly “orthodox” (by European Jewish standards) and therefore, by implication, must be *unorthodox*. In this way, and without ever having to say so directly, (European) whiteness is implicitly cast as an indexical characteristic of the “real” Jew.²² This is of course an odd construction, given that Jewish identities cross conventional racial boundaries.²³ It is not in any way extraordinary to find Jews across “racial” typologies. What is particularly notable in this context is the citing of “Jewish” as an *aspirational* identity and one *in contrast to* “African” and “black.”

*The Jew as Aspirational Body:
Racial Transvaluation and a Reparative Science*

From the imputed standpoint of the Lemba, “Jewish” is an object of desire, a desired status, where authentication, against the presumption of doubt, can only have an *elevating* effect.²⁴ This suggests one way of interpreting the cited “need to belong” attributed to the Lemba is as an illegitimate claim to the distinctions of whiteness, but taken “sideways,” by means of a white identification that they seem not to understand is “tainted.” The Lemba are not figured here as cynical. Rather, they seem to (innocently) collude in the notion that “Jewish” is “white” (until proven otherwise) and in the implicit contrast of value made between Jewish and African identity. Their identification is figured as *understandable* wishful thinking. This implicitly reconfirms the “rightness” of racial attributions to conventional hierarchies of distinction between white

²¹ In a characteristic scene, for example, a Lemba man appears in full religious regalia, but outside a context in which such attire would normally be worn. This projects an air of “unfittingness” to his descriptions of their Jewish religious and cultural practices.

²² Indeed, the complexities of “Jewish” as multiple identities and contestatory cultural definitions, heritages, and practices—indeed, as a cultural *phenomenon*—are entirely residualised by this emphasis and elision with “Jewish” as singular (and unifying) biological marker.

²³ Jews can be found across most if not all conventional “racial” as well as national classifications.

²⁴ It can be argued that this aspirational association is further sedimented in the person of Parfitt, who is already figured as aspirational figure in contrast to the communities through which he travels. In this context, he appears also to symbolically *stand in for* the specific distinction sought—an aspirational whiteness, here conferred by the mark of the Jew.

and black, even as it leaves the Jew in a familiar, tainted netherworld between both.

Thus the construction of the Jew as an aspirational identification reflects both *transvalued*²⁵ as well as more conventionally derogatory associations. Jew as a *desired* rather than *reviled* status presents an obvious contrast to the racialised history of the Jew, but it is premised on a standard cliché of African as “backward Other.” Indeed, *The Sons of Abraham* is stunningly silent on the catastrophic historical consequences of racial science for both Jews and Africans. And it is difficult to know what to make of this. It is, for example, explicit in the narrative logic that this is a quest *to right a wrong*. Two possible wrongs are implied. One is the possibility of a people who are claiming a “wrong” identity. The other, the *preferred wrong*, given the moral trajectory of the film, is that here we have a people who are potentially *wronged by* the invalidation of their (“odd”—but real) identity. Thus, the scientific quest to provide “right” answers about the Lemba cannot but carry an aura of a deeper purpose, a mission to right larger wrongs—the wrongs of racism and racial science themselves.

As viewers, we are powerfully positioned *with the grain* of redemptive desire on offer. These are mutually reinforcing prospects of both vindication for the Lemba (to be both transvalued and, by genetic means, proven “right”) and, in so doing, of the transvalued recuperation of genetic science from its tainted past. In this context, the desires of Tudor Parfitt and of the Lemba are positioned in a complementary affective terrain: both are subjects of identification as well as mirroring loci for satisfactory narrative closure. We *want* the Lemba to be “real” Jews.

V/O By now, Neil Bradman’s geneticists have completed their work on the African samples and they’ve come up with **a stunning result**. The Lemba Y chromosomes do show a number of links with Middle Eastern peoples, including Jews. But one of the Lemba clans, Professor Matibha’s Buba priests, possess that unique genetic signature, the Kohanim gene inherited from the Israelite priests who served in the temple 3000 years ago.

Modern science has given the Lemba the means to **prove** that their ancestors were indeed among the ancient people of the Bible. The Lemba

²⁵ I refer here to Gilman’s (1991) discussion of “transvaluative racial profiling” as a discursive re-valuation in positive, aspirational terms, of formally stigmatised racial identifications. Gilman cites the politics of “black is beautiful” in the 1960s as an example of a transvalued racial discourse. He argues that racial discourse has been historically subject to attributions of both positive and negative qualities.

are descendants of Abraham. Their genetic trail definitely leads out of Africa back to Israel.

And this satisfying denouement is finally, predictably, and indeed by necessity, offered. The Lemba, we are told, *are*, after all, “real” Jews, and indeed, not only that, but Jews of a high order—they carry the *Kohen gene*. The closure offered here, however, presents an uneasy conclusion. For a science that can definitively authenticate a Jew’s body cannot be so uplifting a prospect. And the reconciling of black and Jew is not so novel as that. History is not so simply displaced by silence or wishful optimism. Moreover, even as the Lemba are ostensibly vindicated, their marginality to the question of their own self-identification as well as their imputed oddity are expressly reinstated. It is Parfitt and “Bradman’s geneticists” who bear the means of “truth” and the standing to present it, knowingly, insinuatingly, as a *stunning* twist: *truth*, so goes the cliché, *being stranger than fiction*. This conceit (a homage to pot-boiler and mystery genre alike) would seem to disclaim what is perhaps less obvious, that a genetic invalidation of the Lemba, within the narrative logics of this documentary and this science, would have been virtually inconceivable. Such a counter-finding could only have *negated* the authoritative as well as ethical standing of the science (and the scientists), could only have reinstated rather than redeemed the colonial-racial referents that provide the imaginative foundations of the enterprise.

Phantasm and Desire

I would like to conclude this essay by raising two linked questions, one concerning the terms of congruence between representation and science as they are exemplified in *The Sons of Abraham*; and the second turning to perhaps the more interesting question of desire and the seductions that seem to accrue to the search for a Jewish gene. Here I would like to offer some speculative thoughts on the underpinning fantasies (fanciful images that reflect more or less conscious wishes) and phantasies (the unconscious arena of desire and inchoate yearnings) that seem to be attached both to the science and the spectacle of a search for the sons of Abraham.

What is the significance of a (post)colonial imaginary as a lens for a contemporary taxonomy of cultural/embodyed identity? I would suggest that the juxtaposition of this specific scientific experiment and the conventions of its representation are not incidental. The colonial adventure narrative arose as part of the cultural apparatus of imperial expansion and framed “race” as a eugenic as well as a colonial science. This in turn presaged the intersecting histories of

Jewish and African people as bodies of voyeuristic fascination and as degraded identities. In this context both racial science and the material practices accruing to it dovetailed with a particular popular imaginary: the racial *episteme* thus forged the conditions of possibility of knowledge about bodies, cultures, and identity—producing the subjects and objects of (post)colonial modernity. In this endeavour, science and spectacle were not only contiguous, but inextricable. The contemporary quest for a “Jewish Gene” would seem embedded in this logic, notwithstanding (or indeed one might suggest, because of) attempts to frame it as a redemptive (or perhaps simply “innocent”) quest. Many questions arise: Is it possible to focus a taxonomic gaze on Jewish and African bodies without invoking the history of scientific racism? What responsibilities does contemporary science have to those histories? Does a genetic understanding of cultural identity *intrinsically* tend toward objectification and voyeurism? Was *The Sons of Abraham* simply a “bad” representation of a “good” science?

A second question arising in this context concerns the specific processes of visual spectacle and the terms through which science is sedimented in the wider culture. Visual media and the processes of spectacularisation (including through non-visual forms such as language and narrative) are not simply an epiphenomenal event tacked on to science after the fact. Rather, they reflect and forge the affective economies that both drive and accrue from scientific endeavours. In other words, spectacle has an *epistemic* character: it concerns the relationship of feeling to knowledge (the conditions of what can be knowable) and *epistemology* has a “feeling structure.” In this respect, *The Sons of Abraham* provides an edifying example of the ways in which racial sensibilities are infused with relations of desire—both voyeuristic (eroticised through the functions of “the gaze”) and epistemic (the satisfactions of knowing, linked to but not reducible to the erotic). The spectacular framing of the quest for the Jewish gene thus reflects a continued currency attached to racial taxonomy: the Jewish gene is an object of desire through its reiteration of (as well as through its apparent departure from) antecedent characterisations of Jewish and African bodies, themselves articulated through regimes of knowledge attached to desire. That Jewish genes are ascribed capital in this context speaks of race as an arena of continued capital; its apparent transvaluation in this instance seems to present as a minor (and as we saw, ambivalent at best) revision in an overriding regime of human value ascription, historically given to inhumanities but also so powerfully persuasive, so given to noble expectation. The rehabilitation of racial science offered here is in part possible because of the ways in which, by such means, it can seem to encompass its opposite tendencies (it can be used “for good”).

The visual tropes of a magnificent and primordial African landscape, the epic languages of antiquity and of journeys across seas and vast unmappable distances, of the foundations of human history itself, powerfully reference what is understood as an inchoate human desire, a projective phantasy of origin in which one finds oneself at the seat of humanness itself. This is constituted at one and the same time as an epistemic as well as a fetishistic desire—one that intermingles a drive to know with an eroticised drive to visual delectation. The anthropomorphism of land, and of Sena as a mythology of place, thus cements an anthropomorphism of body and identity. Even as the Lemba emerge as figures of a “throwback” gaze, they, like Sena, become, by this means, imbricated in a mode of desire that promises to bridge the evolutionary distance between “them” and the notional “us,” the preferred subjects of the filmic gaze, who are not Lemba, but who find in “their” redemptive explanation something elevating of “our” own.

The science of the Jewish gene, as well as the terms of its representation, tap into (and arise from) deeply familiar tropes of racial difference as hierarchy. They play out on a field of the *already-known* with respect to which bodies require explanation and which do not. The reinforcement of the already familiar speaks directly to the epistemic pleasures of “filling-in”; by this means, one, as viewer, can recognise oneself as knowledgeable subject. In *The Sons of Abraham*, the specific terms of “filling-in” take place in at least two ways, both of which imbricate knowing and feeling. First are the visual tropes and conventions of anthropological voyeurism that direct our subject–object identifications. There is a notional “we” here: those who are not Lemba, but who find them a compelling curiosity. This “we” is confronted with figures who are at once pathetic and *sympathetic*. Perhaps most importantly, the visual economies of *The Sons of Abraham* invoke, without the necessity of spelling them out, a racial commonsense that renders comprehensible both the desires attributed to the Lemba as well as those of Parfitt and his team.

As an article of faith, the DNA testing carried out here is cast as definitive and proven rather than as an experimental and inexact technology. It is the Lemba only who seem to occupy the arena of “experimental”; as objects of plausible doubt, their ambiguities are seen intrinsically to demand the intervention of an authoritative investigation. And yet *is* cultural genetic profiling a proven “fact”? Can something as complex and diverse as cultural identity be “captured” by a gene, either literally or ideologically? For that matter, to what degree is a “gene” by any definition—and there are profound disagreements within the scientific community about what genes are—a “proven” fact? The focus on the Lemba as scientific conundrum displaces the

questions of the gene and of genetic testing as matters of doubt—as, in a word, experimental. At the very least, the DNA testing of this community, whether for purposes of falsification or authentication, constitutes a social experiment, and an unacknowledged one at that. The presumptions of benignity, partly emergent from the narratively predictable outcome (the Lemba *will* be proven to be Jews, and not only Jews, but Kohens), sidesteps the question of just what kind of impact might accrue to the casting of a people's history and culture to the realms of doubt. What would it mean if the Lemba had not been found to have “Kohanim” genes?

Embedded in this spectacular economy is thus a second order of filling-in—what might be termed the “economies of expectation” that emerge from the parallel plot trajectories of the narratives in play. The narrative structures of colonial adventure and of scientific quest turn on linked dramas demanding the facing of danger and the solving of mystery—both inflected by a higher purpose (the seeking of the grail). In this context, the finding of a Jewish gene *against-all-odds* becomes both a foregone conclusion and the necessary denouement that provides narrative closure. As viewers, we are positioned with a tide of expectation, in this instance, the desire to find what is being sought and to believe *a priori* in its capital as *truth*. It is notable that nowhere in *The Sons of Abraham* is the science of the Jewish gene substantively explained. Instead, the gene as *fact* is presented as a logical inference of its status as *true*.²⁶ And that “truth” is an admixture of its *plausibility* predicated upon a powerful investment of belief.

The Sons of Abraham provides, in this sense, a window onto the profoundly phantasmatic character of race itself. The Jew's gene (and both Jewish and African bodies) oscillate, deeply troubled, between the experiential materialities of racism and the phantasmatic projections of place and standing, the profound affectivities—both of desire and repudiation—that accrue to race and ethnic identifications. We are never told *why* it is important to know if the Lemba are “really” Jewish because the imperatives of a racialised field are already understood, are already so profoundly embedded in the wider episteme (both scientific and popular). The answer is obvious. The question follows.

The claim of finding a Jewish gene speaks to the fantasy of predictive rationality and to the desire to believe in the intrinsic “good” of that rationality. Investments in the elegant efficiency of science, in its precision and predictive prowess, are quintessential modern values and deeply felt terms of attachment

²⁶ Megan Boler (2006) has analysed this distinction as it arose in the satiric political comedy of Stephen Colbert in his coining of the word “truthiness” to describe the quality of being “truthy” as distinct from “factly.”

to science as avatar of what counts as progress. The modern scientific subject arising from this ideal bespeaks a *normotic* phantasy²⁷—that is, a phantasy that would deny the possibility of the uncaptured and unknowable, that in so doing denies life itself. The scientist as normotic subject is one who *knows* (or can know) absolutely, one whose objective gaze guarantees that he will be the author of his own being. In this sense, the project of genetics itself seems imbued with normotic promise, a bulwark against the uncertainties of place that attach to day-to-day lives. It is the promise also that genetics has something to say about who we are, has some capital to add to human distinction.

The “Jewish gene” appeals to investments in deep notions of identity, to phantasies of transcendence and of belonging, to desires to locate ourselves by way of origin stories that tell us our lives are meaningful, connected to others, and part of historical currents bigger than ourselves.²⁸ There is also the collateral and manifest fantasy that we can know the boundaries of identity because they are marked (as markers for better things) within our own bodies. The notion that what was formerly reviled can be redeemed is yet another powerful notion. In this context, the specific transvaluation of the Jew offers a metaphor of the possibility of transcendent personal redemption, perhaps one of the most powerful iconic aspirations of the Judaeo-Christian (and Western) imaginary. Likewise, the possibility of a redemptive science, particularly on this terrain, speaks not only to familiar post-Holocaust and postcolonial discourses of reparation, but in so doing, to the imagined possibility of finding again an ethical life, out of the ashes of human atrocity.

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²⁷ With thanks to Peter Redman for extended discussion with me on this point.

²⁸ For poignant further discussion of this question of investedness in identities and identity politics, both as a remedy for social exclusions and as a site for belonging, see Rothman (1998).

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