

Judeotropicalism¹: Jewish Transculturations in the Lusophone New World

ABSTRACT: This paper conceptualizes Sephardic Jewish survival in the Iberian Peninsula and the so-called New World through the lens of Lusotropicalism, syncretism, transculturation and *mestizaje*. Beginning with the Edict of Expulsion in Spain and forced conversion to Catholicism in Portugal, New Christians face the violent side of transculturation. After the Inquisition is set up in Portugal, New Christians develop syncretic methods to worship as both Jews and Christians. Under a united peninsula between 1580-1640, Conversos flee to Holland where they unite with other Jews and become the *Nação*, a community whose identity is both religious and financial. This group goes with the Dutch West India Company to Recife where some Portuguese New Christians become Jews once again. After the Portuguese retake Recife, the Jews of the *Nação* flee to Suriname, developing *mestizo* communities there and in some of the Caribbean islands. Other Jews from Recife arrive in New Amsterdam (New York) where they establish a thriving community. After 500 years, the influence of these groups can still be felt in the synagogues built in New York, the creole language Papiamentu/o spoken in Curaçao, Aruba and Bonaire, and the tombstones in Suriname, Curaçao and Barbados, among other things.

KEYWORDS: transculturation, Lusotropicalism, Gilberto Freyre, Judeotropicalism, New Christians, Holland, Sephardim, synagogues

RESUMO: Este artigo investiga várias teorias usadas para explicar a mistura de raças e culturas como o Lusotropicalismo, transculturalismo, sincretismo religioso e miscigenação para examinar a sobrevivência dos Judeus sefarditas depois da Expulsão de 1492 da Espanha e das conversões forçadas em Portugal em 1497 até hoje em dia. Durante a Inquisição em Portugal, comunidades Judaicas desenvolveram métodos sincréticos de praticar religião como Judeus e Cristãos. Sob a península unida entre 1580 e 1640, muitos destes Cristãos Novos saíram de Portugal e foram para Holanda, onde voltaram a praticar Judaísmo com outros Judeus e tornaram-se num grupo financeiro e religioso muito unido e influente chamado “a Nação.” Este grupo viajou com a Companhia Holandesa do Oeste para Recife e outras colônias no Caribe. Depois de Portugal recapturar Recife,

os Judeus da Nação fugiram a Suriname e formaram comunidades mestiças lá e no Caribe. Outros Judeus de Recife chegaram em Novo Amsterdão (Nova Iorque), onde estabeleceram uma comunidade vibrante. Depois de 500 anos, a influência deste grupo ainda existe nas sinagogas e comunidades que eles construíram nos Estados Unidos, a língua crioula de Papiamentu/o falada em Curaçao, Aruba e Bonaire, e nas pedras tumulares em Suriname, Curaçao, Barbados entre outras coisas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: transculturação, Lusotropicalismo, Gilberto Freyre, Judeotropicalismo, Cristãos Novos, Holanda, sefarditas, sinagogas

On the corner of 70th Street and Central Park West in New York City stands a majestic building with a prominent cornerstone that reads 1654. The date seems incongruous amongst the brownstones built primarily in the late nineteenth century. However, the structure and the year inscribed on it correspond to a significant moment in both Portuguese and American history, and its presence reminds us how Lusophone culture is still very much alive here in the twenty-first century. It was in 1654 that twenty-three Jews arrived in the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam from Recife, Brazil after the Portuguese had recaptured it.² Though the Jewish refugees were not welcomed by the governor, Pieter Stuyvesant, who wrote to the Dutch West India Company for permission to bar them from settling, the Jews remained in Manhattan and later established Congregation Shearith Israel.³ Today, the congregation includes Sephardic Jews whose ancestors originated in Iberia, as well as families that come from the larger Ashkenazi or Eastern European Jewish population in New York City. While the majority in the synagogue do not speak Portuguese, though there are a few native Brazilians and Portuguese, their rituals, including the way prayers are chanted, derive from the Western Sephardic Traditions that began in Portugal and Spain amongst the descendants of the New Christians who had been forcibly converted to Catholicism in the fifteenth century, and later evolved in Amsterdam amongst Ashkenazi Jews and Italian Jews. While many historians and Judaic scholars have written extensively about this topic, this paper examines how a Lusophone concept used to explain the mixture of races and cultures in Brazil, Lusotropicalism, can ironically be adapted as “Judeotropicalism” to study both the thriving and declining Sephardic communities in the Western Hemisphere.

Lusotropicalism and racial democracy are two terms associated with Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre's 1933 book, *The Masters and the Slaves* (*Casa-grande e Senzala*).⁴ These expressions refer to miscegenation or the mixing of races—the former to the predisposition of the Portuguese in colonizing tropical areas and having children with women of color because the Portuguese themselves are descendants of Moors, and the latter to the supposed equality amongst races in Brazil due to this resulting mixture (Freyre 12). When Freyre wrote his treatise, social scientists believed that there was a racial hierarchy in which whites were superior to blacks as well as those of mixed backgrounds. Racial determinism was a standard in academia and was used to fuel the Fascist policies of Nazi Germany. Freyre, however, had studied with Franz Boaz, a renowned Jewish anthropologist at Columbia University, who saw the growing anti-Semitism in Europe at the time and believed that culture rather than race should be emphasized in the study of societies (Maybury-Lewis lxxxiii). Today, scholars consider Freyre's work to be extremely chauvinistic; however, historian Thomas Skidmore points out that he was innovative for his era because his work focused attention on the inherent value of Africans as the representatives of a high civilization in their own right. Freyre was thus furnishing, for those Brazilians who might want to take it that way, a rationale for a multiracial society in which the component 'races'—European, African and Indigenous—could be seen as equally valuable (22).

The Brazilian sociologist also wished to differentiate Brazil from the United States where he had traveled extensively. He believed that in his country there was "a marked absence of post-manumission institutionalized racism (e.g., segregation & Jim Crow law(s), (and) a general absence of race-based group violence (e.g., lynching, race-based hate crimes)" compared to North America (Peña, et al 749).

Since its publication, Freyre's theories have been refuted, for racism does indeed exist in Brazil, and it seems a little far-fetched to claim that North African ancestry made the Portuguese any more likely to have sexual relations with women in the countries they colonized than other European men. Moreover, Lusotropicalism was used by the Portuguese government to excuse their colonization in Africa well into the twentieth century. According to the historian David Birmingham, "When fascism fell out of favor in 1945, Salazar's spin doctors pretended that interracial breeding proved that the Portuguese had never been racists in the Nazi or Afrikaner mold" (24). Nevertheless, Freyre's work preceded other theories of racial and cultural mixture that can be used in the study of Sephardic Jews in the Western Hemisphere.

One theory that can be utilized to address cultural “merging” is transculturation, which was developed by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in 1947 (Paul 241). Anthropologist Fernando Coronil explains that, “transculturation is used to apprehend at once the destructive and constructive moments in histories affected by colonialism and imperialism” (xv). Ultimately, aspects of both cultures are gained and lost in the violent process of creating something new. Transculturation is often associated with *mestizaje* or the mixture of Europeans and indigenous peoples specifically in Latin America and can also be used to explain the development of Creole languages as well as religious syncretism.

The term “syncretism” originally derived from the Greek prefix “syn-” meaning “with” or “reunion” with “Cretan” a group that was an adversary of the ancient Greeks (Sathler and Nascimento 96). Syncretism by definition has an aggressive or militaristic undertone and when applied to religion, it denotes how one religion is imposed on another by forced conversion. In the so-called New World, different syncretic religions developed amongst the enslaved Africans who were forced to become Christians. As a result of coerced conversion, syncretic religions ultimately blend, though usually with one being “masked” or hidden. Syncretism or cultural mixing is perceived differently depending on which group is imposing itself on the other.

This paper argues that, in order to subvert Portuguese religious policies, overcome prejudice and ultimately survive until the present day, Sephardic Jews used tactics such as syncretism, transculturation, and *mestizaje*. It is important to note that in some instances, however, the Sephardic Jews themselves were the ones who dominated and subjugated others. One of the first examples of transculturation and syncretism occurred after the Jews were expelled from Spain. Three months after their resounding victory against the Moors in Granada that culminated in the Reconquista, King Ferdinand II of Aragon and Queen Isabella I of Castile ordered the expulsion of all Jews and Muslims from their borders on March 31, 1492, to be carried out by July 31, 1492. Both groups could stay if they converted to Catholicism but would face death if they continued to observe their faiths.

The historian Lu Ann Homza notes that although “the number of Jews who left Spain cannot be calculated with any reliability, the figure of 150,000 to 165,000 has been suggested. There are no reliable statistics either, for the Jews who chose to remain and convert” (xxi). Many went east to the Ottoman Empire where they were welcomed by the Sultans who valued their skills in trade and languages.

It was in the Ottoman Empire that the Jews practiced the same traditions that they had in Spain and spoke Judeo-Spanish or Ladino, a Romance language influenced by Hebrew. Others ventured south to North Africa to reside alongside the Muslims with whom they had lived in Iberia for centuries. Many other Spanish Jews, an estimated 70,000, fled west across the border to Portugal where they joined the 30,000 or so Portuguese Jews who already lived there (Melammed 2).

The Jews who crossed the Portuguese frontier from Spain were at first welcomed by King John II, who saw them as beneficial to the nation's economy at a time when the country was expanding its empire and competing with Spain. Indeed, the Spanish Expulsion order came during the so-called period of discoveries and both countries were seeking new trade routes to Asia. The King viewed the wealth and education of the Spanish Jews as a way to build up his nation and though he had them taxed upon their arrival to fill his coffers, he allowed them to practice their religion in order to encourage them to stay in Portugal. This policy changed drastically in 1497 when his successor, King Manuel I, was pressured to evict the Jews as part of an agreement to marry the daughter of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella.

Damião de Góis, a humanist and historian, wrote chronicles describing how there were opponents to the expulsion who "brought forth a battery of spiritual and material arguments" including the fact that even the Pope permitted Jews to live in his lands (Soyer 184). Other arguments against the expulsion included the fact that the Jews would help the Muslims by providing them with technological information regarding the manufacturing of armaments (Soyer 184). Ultimately, the Portuguese king only expelled the Muslims and forcibly converted the Jews by taking away Hebrew books, confiscating properties, and kidnapping Jewish children and placing them with Catholic families (Soyer 8). According to the historian François Soyer, King Manuel "had two very different aims and ambitions in the first years of his reign: his eagerness to finance a voyage of exploration to India and his obsession with the launch of a new crusade against the Muslims in Morocco" (8). Keeping the Jews and their wealth within the kingdom and not alienating Spain by converting them seemed to solve the king's problems. Moreover, after their conversion King Manuel directed the Old Christians not to inquire into the faith of the New Christians for thirty-five years.

The conversion of the Jews was not accepted by the general populace and in 1506 the resentment that the Old Christians felt toward the New Christians turned to violence as over 2,000 New Christians were massacred in Lisbon.

Melammed explains that, “the king was certain that despite the forced nature of the conversions, the converts or their descendants would eventually assimilate into the Portuguese Catholic society. There had been no plan for establishing an inquisition or for discriminating between Old and New Christians” (6). The theory of transculturation can explain the hostile reaction toward the converts. Transculturation is often a forceful process when two cultures come into contact with one another. King Manuel attempted to force the merger not only of two communities—that of the Portuguese Jews with the Portuguese Catholics—but also a third, the Spanish New Christians, who in addition to having a Jewish background were not welcomed because many were wealthy and came from Spain, Portugal’s arch rival. Ultimately, in 1536, the Inquisition was instituted in Portugal to find and punish heretics as well as Judaizers, or those who spread Judaism. The Inquisition institutionalized the transcultural process by creating an atmosphere of fear to force the merger of a minority community within a larger one. Whereas it was successful in some respects as countless New Christians abandoned their traditions, it also led to a different strategy of survival, that of syncretism.

Many New Christians who did not wish to lose their Jewish heritage and assimilate completely became Crypto-Jews who secretly practiced Judaism while outwardly following Christianity. They fled to places that were far from the Inquisitional headquarters in Lisbon and Évora, such as the northeastern part of Portugal and lived in tiny villages in the Beiras and Trás-os-Montes. In these small communities, Crypto-Jews observed Jewish rituals clandestinely while still going to church to dupe their Christian neighbors. They also blended some aspects of both religions, as long as they didn’t threaten their Jewish identity. One noted group that maintained its Jewish heritage for over five hundred years lives in the village of Belmonte in the Beira Baixa region of Portugal. Though they were obliged to publicly practice Catholicism, the Jews of Belmonte observed many Jewish religious rites and rituals within their homes and intermarried amongst themselves. Because of their isolation, the Belmonte Jews believed that they were the only Jews left in the world until a Polish-Jewish mining engineer named Samuel Schwarz “discovered” them in 1917 (Gerber, et al 276). In his 1926 book about their closed community he wrote that the Crypto-Jewish traditions were “jealously guarded and revealed only after gaining the complete trust of the outsider” and that only after he “recited the Shema prayer (“Hear, O Israel”) for them, they recognized the name Adonai (“the Lord”), apparently the

only Hebrew word they knew; this word magically opened their doors for him” (Melammed 143). Schwarz learned that the traditions were passed on orally by the women as there were no synagogues where the men could officiate (Melammed 145). The Belmonte Jews also incorporated Catholic elements in their life. They prayed to different saints, such as Saint Raphael, and celebrated a number of Christian holidays, such as the Feast of Corpus Christi (Melammed 145).

The Jews of Belmonte are an excellent example of syncretism as they maintained their religion in a hostile environment by retaining aspects of it and passing these on for generations. According to Melammed, “essentially the Belmonte community had mastered the art of living in two worlds simultaneously, adopting two mentalities, both of which were normative for them” (146). After Schwarz published his book, other Jews visited Belmonte with the intention of converting them to normative twentieth century Judaism. In the 1990s Israeli rabbis of Moroccan descent went to the village to “Judaize” the Crypto-Jews. They built a synagogue, brought someone who could perform circumcisions (*mohel*) and built a ritual bath (*mikveh*) (Melammed 153). Melammed notes further that “While the men now have an institution of their own, namely, the synagogue, the women have not relinquished all their “traditional” roles. The women still marry within the fold, and the Passover picnic is still the annual community affair” (154). The “reconversion” of the Crypto-Jews in Belmonte reflects the transculturation of a syncretized group. The Moroccan rabbis did not regard the Crypto-Jews as true or “real” Jews and felt the need to convert them. “Despite the fact by the standards of the outside world, two-thirds of them converted and are full-fledged Jews, the “Last Marranos” seem determined to retain the Marrano part of their identity as well” (154). It is ironic that some of the Crypto-Jews who for centuries hid amongst their Catholic neighbors for fear that they would be converted to Catholicism will now need to hide from Jews who wish to “re-convert” them to a different form of Judaism.

Amsterdam and the “Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation”

The Conversos who were not hiding out in far off villages had to wait until the unification of Spain and Portugal between 1580 and 1640 to leave the country en masse. Though the Inquisition was still in place, thousands fled from Portugal across Spain to France and eventually to Holland. The Dutch allowed freedom of religion after having been subjugated by the Spanish for decades. According to historian Miriam Bodian, “The appreciation the early Portuguese-Jewish émigrés

in Amsterdam felt for the religious freedom granted them was one of the factors that contributed to the rapid growth of the community” (“The Geography” 254). So many Conversos were crossing the border through Spain that the Spanish thought that all the Portuguese in their midst, whether they were Catholic or not, had some Jewish origin (Bodian *Hebrews* 13).

Once they reached the Netherlands, the New Christians became part of a community called the “Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation” or the *Nação*. In Amsterdam, all foreign ethnic and religious populations were called “nations” and the Portuguese Nation or *Nação* were the Conversos and Crypto-Jews who had come from Portugal (Bodian *Hebrews* 7). The *Nação* spoke Portuguese and were involved almost exclusively in trade. They also defined themselves as “*homens de negócios*, or ‘men of affairs’” (Melammed 14). In this sense, their identity integrated faith with finance. The members of the *Nação* helped each other out because,

In the long run, the economic structure created by the Portuguese Conversos was based on the notion of group solidarity. The amazing degree to which they supported and cooperated with one another precisely because they all belonged to “the Nation” was one of the outstanding characteristics of the Portuguese *converso* (15).

According to Melammed, rather than creating a Catholic identity, the mass conversions and the establishment of the Inquisition were instrumental in making a viable Jewish identity that could survive in other countries and adapt to difficult circumstances. Thus, transculturation can be used to explain how the virulent persecution faced by the Conversos at the hands of the Portuguese Catholics actually helped create a new Lusophone identity, one that identified itself as Iberian, spoke Portuguese and practiced Judaism. Moreover, it was extremely unified and would eventually challenge their country of origin by becoming part of a trade network for their competitors, the Dutch.

Recife, the First Jewish Community in the Western Hemisphere

During the seventeenth century, the Dutch were expanding their empire and many Jews of the *Nação* joined the ranks of the Dutch West India Company to increase trade with newly established colonies. After the Dutch had colonized parts of northeastern Brazil in 1630, the *Nação* petitioned to go to Pernambuco in 1635 (Feitler 123). The Jews that arrived there built the first synagogue in the Western Hemisphere in Recife in 1636 called Kahal Zur Israel. During the time

that Jews were in Recife, a fascinating development occurred. According to the historian Bruno Feitler, the

Dutch conquest did not necessarily create a more diversified community. Instead, it changed the percentage of first generation Portuguese and Brazilian natives within the community. In effect, the creation of Dutch Brazil led to an unprecedented set of circumstances: A Catholic territory inhabited by New Christians where Judaism was permitted, and which was subject to Calvinist rule (125).

Many Portuguese New Christians living in Recife viewed the arrival of the “Dutch” Jews as an opportunity to return to the religion of their forefathers and began attending services at the synagogue as well as partaking in other rituals, such as circumcision. Soon, the community grew as New Christians with a Jewish background “merged” into the *Nação*. Others did not become Jewish and continued to practice Catholicism even though their background would cause them to be suspect by the Portuguese Inquisition that would soon monitor the colony after the Dutch left.

When the Dutch capitulated to the Portuguese after years of war, they, along with the Jews, were given three months to leave Recife and the other parts of “Dutch” Brazil. Whereas many Jews went back to Amsterdam, others went to Dutch colonies in the Caribbean, such as Suriname and Curaçao, and others petitioned Oliver Cromwell of Great Britain to go to British colonies in the Caribbean (Portner). At the time, Jews were not openly permitted to live in England, but Cromwell allowed them to go to Barbados under the stipulation that they pay a heavy tax and observe restrictions, such as not owning plantations, slaves, or offering testimony in court. As mentioned earlier, twenty-three Jews ended up settling in New Amsterdam or New York, a city that eventually became home to one of the most influential Jewish communities in the world.

Jews of the Dutch Caribbean

After Pernambuco, Suriname became the largest Jewish community in the New World and received Jews not just from Recife but from Amsterdam and Eastern Europe as well (Ben-Ur, “Still Life,” 35). Suriname is located at the northernmost point of South America between Guyana, Brazil and French Guiana and is considered to be part of the Caribbean. It was colonized by both the British, from 1650 to 1667, and the Dutch, between 1667 and 1975. The Ashkenazim and the

Nação lived separately in Suriname and did different types of work. The Ashkenazi community of European Jews lived primarily in the capital of Paramaribo and were merchants, worshipping in the Neve Shalom synagogue that was constructed in 1719. The Sephardic Jews lived primarily in the Jodensavanne or the Jewish Savannah, where they worked in sugarcane cultivation along the river. It was there that they built the Kahal Kadosh Beracha Ve Shalom synagogue in 1685. Later, some Jews from the Jodensavanne moved to Paramaribo and built the Zedek ve Shalom synagogue in 1736. In 1817, 82% of the Jews moved to Paramaribo to escape the unrest amongst the maroons or runaway former slave communities in the rural areas (Ben-Ur “A Matriarchal Matter” 153). Whereas the Portuguese and the Eastern European Jews did not mix, many of the former had children with their enslaved Africans.

It was in Suriname that we find an example of Jewish *mestizaje* as well as religious syncretism amongst the enslaved. Though it is well-known that many slave owners throughout the New World coerced their female slaves to have sexual relations with them, there are many documented cases of enslaved Surinamese seeming to have had consensual relations with their Jewish masters (though it is questionable that the power dynamic of master and slave would ever allow for consent). Though the children of non-Jewish women (in this case enslaved) and Jewish men are not considered Jewish by Jewish Law, in the case of the Surinamese Sephardic Jews, many of the enslaved females and their children were converted and considered by the *Nação* to be Jewish. According to the historian Ben-Ur, the Jews “seem to have taken the lead among whites in converting slaves to the household religion” (“A Matriarchal Matter” 158). This resulted in the birth of a large mixed race Jewish community that, although treated as second-class citizens, still practiced Judaism (Cohen 161). In *Jews in Another Environment*, the historian Robert Cohen describes conflicts that the mixed race Jews had with the white Jews of the Jodensavanne, beginning with the right to be buried in the Jewish graveyard (Cohen 167). With the decline of agriculture at the end of the eighteenth century, both white and mixed race Jews moved to the city. Language and artistic expression were also affected by the two cultures living in close proximity.

The mixing of the Jews with non-Jews in Suriname as well as in Curaçao led to the creation of Papiamentu/o, a Creole language. According to Ben-Ur,

The mingling of Jews with the local [sic] African descendant population exerted a profound linguistic impact. Partly because they were among the

earliest white settlers in the Caribbean, Sephardim had a significant impact on creole languages, including Papiamentu, the lingua franca of Curaçao by the 1740s, and Suriname's Sranan Tongo, formerly known as Negro English (*neger engels*) ("A Matriarchal Matter" 167).

Papiamentu has influences from Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, Hebrew and Niger-Congo languages. The closest linguistic cousin is Cabo Verde Creole where there was also a population of Portuguese Jews who arrived via Morocco (Jacobs 64). Another result of the mixture of cultures in Suriname and Curaçao can be found in the iconography of the gravestones.

Iconography can demonstrate the cultural mixture that took place in the Caribbean amongst the Jews, non-Jews and Africans. Throughout the Caribbean, there are headstones in cemeteries with skulls and crossbones, hourglasses, and hands spread in a priestly blessing with two fingers pointing in different directions. Though there are no explanations for these images, Ben-Ur has found some correlations between the names of the deceased and some carvings. For example, there is a grave of a woman named "Meza" who has a loaf of bread on her headstone as "a charming pun on the family name" (Ben-Ur, "Still Life," 53). Some carvings reflect the syncretic religions living in the Caribbean. There are Christian symbols, such as trumpets and cupids or grapevines that, "provided an opportunity for former Crypto-Jews to transform a familiar Christian symbol into one eminently Jewish" (Ben-Ur, "Still Life," 56). One of the most striking images on many stones is that of an arm coming down from the skies and chopping a tree in half. These images tended to appear on tombstones of people who died young or in the prime of life (Ben-Ur, "Still Life," 65). Ben-Ur also believes that there are allusions to Jews of West African animist religions on some of the stones with the images of cottonwood trees (Ben-Ur, "Still Life," 57).

In addition to living together in Suriname, Africans and Jews were at times discriminated against as well. For instance, in 1775 a theater once banned both groups, yet later, in 1945, the country decreed, "Every Jew who can escape Europe is welcome in Suriname" (Macdonald). Just as the Portuguese Jews of the *Nação* fled Europe for Dutch territories centuries ago, the Dutch Caribbean provided a haven for those needing safety in the twentieth century.

Curaçao differs from Suriname in that it is an arid island and the Jews who lived there were mostly involved in trade rather than sugarcane plantations. Portuguese Jews arrived from Recife and Amsterdam and built the magnificent

synagogue, Mikvé Israel-Emanuel, in 1730. Of all the synagogues of the Caribbean, this one most resembles the central Esnoga synagogue of Amsterdam. It has beautiful blue stained glass windows and an ark made of mahogany. The floors are made of sand—some say to remind the congregants of how Crypto-Jews needed to muffle their voices from the Inquisition. Next to the synagogue is the Jewish Historical Cultural Museum with artifacts from the community, including a memorial to George Maduro, a young man who fought against the Nazis and was killed in a concentration camp. The Museum also contains copies of the most striking headstones from the cemetery, Beit Chaim Blenheim, where over 2,500 Jews are buried. Acid rain from an oil refinery next to the cemetery has eroded most of the headstones.

Jews of Barbados

Though Oliver Cromwell allowed Jews to settle in Barbados, they were taxed and had to live under restrictions, such as prohibitions on owning slaves and land. In Barbados, many became merchants and lived in the capital of Bridgetown on a street called “Jew Street,” later known as Swan Street. According to the historian Holly Snyder, “the market was a singular avenue to affluence for the Jewish merchant, and cultivating customers was the appropriate *modus vivendi* for the achievement of success” (74). However, this changed when the Jews became involved in the cultivation of sugarcane by introducing technology that the Dutch had used in Pernambuco. Ze’ev Portner notes: “The modern windmill, crucial for sugar cane production, was introduced to Barbados by a Sephardic Jew, David de Mercado, and within a short space of twenty years, the economic phenomenon known as the sugar revolution had transformed Barbados forever.” By the mid-nineteenth century, dozens of windmills dotted the island and helped make Barbados the richest British colony in the Western Hemisphere. For almost three centuries, the Portuguese Jews of Barbados continued the religious practices of their ancestors, building three synagogues and maintaining traditions from Amsterdam via Recife as well as London.

Two of the synagogues were constructed in Bridgetown, the capital. Another was built in Speightstown, but it was destroyed during a riot. The Bridgetown synagogue is called Nidhe Israel or the “Scattered of Israel”. The first one, built in 1654, was demolished by a massive hurricane in 1831 that destroyed much of the island and killed 1,500 people. The second synagogue was rebuilt soon after. By then, some of the community had moved to England and in the next few

decades the Sephardic Jewish community of Barbados slowly assimilated into the general population.

One of the ways the transculturation of the Jewish community into Barbadian culture can be seen linguistically is on the headstones of the cemetery that surrounds the synagogue. The earliest stones are written in Hebrew and Portuguese. Over time, they are in Hebrew and Old English, giving way to Modern English. When the last practicing descendant of the Portuguese Jews died in 1929, the synagogue closed and the religious artifacts were sent for safekeeping at the Bevis Marks Synagogue in London. Over the next few decades the old synagogue fell into disrepair and the government wanted to use it as a courthouse. Instead, under the leadership of Sir Paul Altman, a descendant of Jews that arrived from Poland in the 1930s, the synagogue was renovated and a museum was created in what was believed to be the rabbi's house. In 2008, a *mikveh* or ceremonial bath fed by an underground spring was uncovered next to synagogue and archaeologists believe that it may have been buried by debris from the hurricane of 1831. During the cooler months, services take place in the old synagogue. However, during the hot months an air-conditioned house serves as a place of worship.

Few people can remember the days when the first Ashkenazi Jews arrived in Barbados. In a series of personal interviews with me in the spring of 2011, Rose Altman, a Polish immigrant who came to the island in the 1930s, described life on the island for Jews from Eastern Europe as well as Canada and Belgium. At first, some were merchants, but slowly others became involved in real estate development as well as industry. Before the restoration of *Nidhe Israel* (The Scattered of Israel), the community celebrated Sabbaths and holidays at another location, a house in a residential neighborhood. Aunty Rose, as she was called, reminisced about having large Passover seders at her nearby home where she prepared gefilte fish using Barbadian flying fish, a "transcultured dish." She also described how parents were fearful that their children would marry non-Jews and would therefore send them to boarding schools in Canada, England or the United States. Though there are a few white Jewish Barbadians descended from the original families, a number of black Barbadians have more recently converted to the faith with the assistance of the American conservative movement. Some whites, including Stephen Altman, Rose Altman's son, believe that in the long run, "the converts may turn out to be the saviors of the community" (Portner). In this way the process of transculturation will come full circle as black Barbadian Jews will ultimately outnumber white Barbadian Jews.

Jews in the United States

By the eighteenth century, Portuguese Jews were settling not only in Barbados, but also in many other English colonies, including Jamaica, Nevis, and the thirteen colonies that would later become the United States. One group left Barbados and settled in Newport, Rhode Island, which was becoming an important Atlantic seaport at the time. The congregation, called Jeshuat Israel, hired a self-taught architect named Peter Harrison to build the Touro Synagogue. The Touro Synagogue is the oldest synagogue in the United States and became a National Historic Site in 1946. Like Shearith Israel in New York, the congregation also maintains the traditions that originally came from Portugal via Amsterdam. In an interview about the religious practices of the congregation, Rabbi Dr. Marc Mandel wrote,

At Touro Synagogue we try to maintain the connection with the early founders of the synagogue. We have maintained the synagogue building just as the early Spanish and Portuguese Jews had it. We also try to maintain their customs. We have the men and women sit separately just as they did. As far as the prayers go, we try to maintain their customs as best as we can. Most of our members are not from the Spanish Portuguese Culture (Sephardic) (Mandel).

Though the actual congregants are not of the same background as the founders, they still choose to follow the traditions that the original members practiced centuries ago. In this way, the Portuguese Nation has an enduring legacy in modern day Rhode Island.

The congregation also celebrates what *they* feel is a contribution to the establishment of the Bill of Rights in America. Just as the Conversos who arrived in Amsterdam were grateful to the Dutch authorities for allowing them the freedom to practice their religion openly after years of persecution in Iberia, so were the first Portuguese Jews who came to the United States of America. In 1790 George Washington visited Rhode Island along with other members of the cabinet, including Thomas Jefferson, to discuss the ratification of an amendment to the Constitution allowing the freedom of religion. After meeting with leaders of many faiths, Moses Seixas of the Newport Synagogue Yeshuat Israel wrote a letter to the President (qtd. by Twohig 286, on the Touro Synagogue website) expressing how much the Jewish community of Newport respected him and was thankful for his considering the separation of church and state. He wrote:

Deprived as we heretofore have been of the invaluable rights of free Citizens, we now (with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty disposer of all events) behold a Government, erected by the Majesty of the People—a Government, which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance—but generously affording to All liberty of conscience, and immunities of Citizenship: deeming every one, of whatever Nation, tongue, or language, equal parts of the great governmental Machine.

Soon after Seixas sent the letter, the community received a reply on August 21, 1790 from the president himself in which he wrote, “May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants—while everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid” (Washington). Though it is not known just how much the letter from a descendant of Portuguese Jews had on shaping U.S. policy, the congregation celebrates their encounter with the first president of the United States by reading his letter every year.

In conclusion, Lusotropicalism provides an entry to discussing cultural mixing in the New World and the ability of Sephardic Jews to survive and thrive under difficult circumstances. Though many comment on Gilberto Freyre’s allusion to Moorish blood in the Lusophone body, he also lauds the Jewish contribution to the Portuguese temperament. He describes the contributions of the “Israelites” or Jews who had fled to Portugal after being expelled from Spain and had a remarkable capacity to adapt to new places (9). According to Freyre, “It was the Semitic element, mobile and adaptable as no other, that was to confer upon the Portuguese colonizer of Brazil some of the chief physical and psychic conditions for success and resistance” (10). The Jewish role in shaping the Portuguese character and thus assisting them with colonizing tropical regions throughout the New World is not widely acknowledged in Lusophone history or scholarship. Today, many assume Portuguese Jews do not exist, but are rather the descendants of the New Christians who had been forcibly converted to Catholicism at the end of the fifteenth century, and over time, and under the threat of the Inquisition, became Catholic, or in other words, Portuguese. However, through transculturation, and in the specific case of Jews, Judeotropicalism, the Sephardic Jews maintained their identity and traditions, and they arrived, ironically, in the United States before the Roman Catholic Portuguese.

NOTES

1. The term, “Judeotropicalism” was developed jointly by the author and Christopher Larkosh at UMass Dartmouth.
2. There have been several explanations as to how the Jews from Recife arrived in New Amsterdam, including being lost in a storm or by shipwreck. Historian Ann Helen Wainer quotes Oppenheim when she writes that their ship, the *St. Charles*, may have been “diverted by pirates from their intended voyage from Brazil to Holland” after the Portuguese recaptured Recife (6).
3. The Jews from Brazil also petitioned the director general of the company to stay in New Amsterdam, reminding him that the Jews had lost a significant amount of money when Recife fell, and to help the new arrivals in New Amsterdam (Binder 10).
4. The term “racial democracy” does not actually appear in Freyre’s book, yet is implied by his theory on the mixture of races.
5. It has been generally believed that the forced conversion in Portugal began with people going to public squares and having Holy Water sprinkled on their heads, yet it was, in fact, violent as children were taken away from parents, properties were appropriated and books were confiscated (Soyer 8).

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BONNIE S. WASSERMAN is an Assistant Professor of Africana Studies at the University of Arizona. She has her doctorate in Portuguese from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and has taught Portuguese at a number of universities, including Fordham University and Rutgers University-Newark. She was the recipient of two Fulbright Scholarships (Portugal, 1994-95 and Barbados, 2011). Dr. Wasserman is the author of three books: *Contemporary Afro-Brazil: A Multidisciplinary Anthology* (Cognella 2018), *Cinema for Portuguese Conversation* (Focus 2009) and *Metaphors of Oppression in Lusophone Historical Drama* (Focus 2009). Currently, she is writing a monograph on the Afro-Latin American coming of age novel.