**“Philology’s a Thing of God!” Edward Sapir and the Jewish Subtexts of American Anthropology**

**Abstract**

This article explores certain Jewish subtexts of American anthropological thought from the first half of the twentieth century, focusing on the theoretical and artistic work of Edward Sapir. Utilizing Sapir’s academic, lay, and distinctly Jewish publications, along with newly discovered archival material, I argue that Sapir’s deep ambivalence regarding the prospects for Jewishness and modern Jewish identity in the United States can be seen as a subtext woven within his cultural and poetic writings. This article demonstrates the ways in which Sapir’s individualist interpretation of Boasian cultural theory was conditioned by his profound concern for the prospects for Jewish ethnic, national, and religious survival in the United States. Drawing on subtexts found in Sapir’s cultural corpus, this article seeks to better understand the ways in which ideas of Judaism and Jewishness manifest themselves more broadly within the history of American anthropological thought.

**Introduction: Concealing and Revealing the Jewish Subtext**

How have Jewish ideas and dilemmas appeared in anthropological scholarship, and how has that scholarship grappled with the traditional, ethnic, and religious backgrounds of some of its seminal thinkers? For many Jewish Boasian anthropologists, who so profoundly shaped the theoretical and political contours of the discipline of anthropology, the answer seems to have been liberation from tradition itself. In 1939, looking back on his long career, an elderly Franz Boas openly elaborated on this theme in a short essay that was featured in Clifton Fadiman’s “I Believe” series. Boas focused on the role that tradition played in his own journey toward the anthropological sciences.

The psychological origin of the implicit belief in the authority of tradition…became a problem which engaged my thoughts for many years. In fact, my whole outlook upon social life is determined by the question: how can we recognize the shackles that tradition has laid upon us? For when we recognize them, we are also able to break them. (Clifton 1939: 21)

For Boas, anthropology was a liberating science, perhaps uniquely capable of breaking the shackles of tradition that can so easily bind an individual to the racial and cultural stereotypes of the past. Boas never specified what precise tradition he was referring to, but references to the “shackles of dogma” (1938: 201) and the “ceremonial of his parent’s home” (ibid.) in his earlier essay “An Anthropologists Credo” strongly suggest that he was referring to Judaism.

A wide range of historical research has demonstrated that the anthropological sciences were a medium through which scholars of Jewish descent could escape the particularistic shackles of their own native Jewish identities (Frank 1997, Glick 1982, Lewis 2001, Messer 1986). Herein lies the crux of the problem. The development of the anthropological study of Judaism and Jewishness in America emerged in the context of a mythos of liberation and escape from the particularistic “aspects of what might be termed Jewish culture or Jewish cultures” (Boyarin 2013: 93).

This article explores this paradigm of liberation, focusing on the Jewish subtexts that can be found just beneath the surface of the writings of Edward Sapir, remembered as Boas’s most “brilliant and challenging student” (Benedict 1939: 465, Handler 1983: 208). Drawing on Sapir’s publications from academic, lay, and distinctly Jewish presses, along with previously unreferenced archival material, I demonstrate how Sapir chose to follow a very different path from many of his Jewish Boasian peers. This article argues that Sapir expressed a profound moral ambivalence on the subject of the prospects of Jewishness and modern Jewish identity in the United States. This ambivalence found a unique subtextual expression in his cultural and poetic writings. In addition, this article also shows how Sapir’s concern for the prospects of Jewish ethnic, national, and religious survival in the United States conditioned Sapir’s unique interpretation of Boasian cultural theory. Finally, this article follows Jonathan Boyarin’s approach of archaeologically “teas[ing] out abstract matters of personal identity” from the necessarily fragmentary evidence left by the silence of Jewish ethnographers regarding their own traditions (Boyarin 2013: 78). These silent subtexts of Sapir’s corpus are mobilized here to better contextualize how the ideas of Judaism and Jewishness manifest themselves more broadly within the history of American anthropological thought.

Sapir’s biographers have long considered the role that Judaism and Jewishness played in both his professional and personal life. However, immediately after his early and untimely death from heart failure in 1939, Sapir’s sensitivity to the Jewish experience was almost entirely unremarked by his contemporaries Boas (1939), Benedict (1939), and Eggerton (1939), his psychotherapist, Harry Stack Sullivan (1984 [1939]), and even his own son, J. David Sapir (1985). It may be that Sapir felt that a largely “unobtrusive Jewish identity would do him no harm” (Darnell1991, Siskin 1991: 2), as he advanced his careerby moving to Chicago to become an associate professor of anthropology. Later, scholars interested in early Jewish engagement in American anthropology have turned to Sapir as a classical Boasian example of ethnological indifference or hostility to the ostensibly ossified and parochial nature of Orthodox Judaism in their wider political effort to combat scientific racism (Boyarin 2013: 93, Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1996: 40).

However, this perspective gives only a partial image of Sapir’s complex relationship to Judaism and, more broadly, with religion. Certainly, Sapir did express distaste for the dogmas and rote rituals of the various streams of American Orthodox Judaism of his day. In a 1918 review essay, Sapir criticized “the petrification of the Jewish religion in medieval and modern times into the mechanical routine of prayer and dull ritual” (Sapir 1918: 15). However, in that same essay, Sapir not only lauds Reform Judaism’s ability to “lighten the load of Orthodoxy” (ibid.) but also praises even more enthusiastically what he termed “the fresher atmosphere of intense spiritual experience” (Sapir 1918: 16).

All of these considerations highlight that Sapir’s perspective on Jewishness and its relationship to anthropological discourse is far more complex than the image that was painted by his earlier biographers. Indeed, some of Sapir’s Jewish students at Yale recognized this complexity. One of these students, Rabbi Edgar E. Siskin, wrote that Sapir’s interest in “Semitics,” which Meade (1973: 96) and Benedict (1939: 468) also noted, went beyond academics to his personal investment in the Jewish issues of his time. Perhaps echoing Sapir’s own critique of the petrified nature of organized religion, Siskin observed, “although he [Sapir] was neither affiliated with a synagogue nor with any of the apparatus of organized Jewish life, he was not a hidden Jew” (Siskin 1986: 288). Similarly, in a much earlier obituary, David Mandelbaum noted, “In conversation, he would occasionally tell how profoundly Judaism had affected his life” (Mandelbaum 1941: 134).

In his own way, Siskin intuited a kind of Jewish pathos within Sapir that could be revealed only to a (very) select few. As Siskin wrote in his critical review of Darnell’s biography:

There were few individuals in the Yale community with whom he [Sapir] might have cared to talk about Jewish life or the status of the Jew, but with me, a student in his department who was a rabbi, there were no inhibitions. (Siskin 1991: 228)

Siskin saw Sapir as adept at concealing himself to some while revealing his profound sensitivity to Jewish concerns to others. Finding Siskin’s assessment convincing, this article follows some of the subtexts in Sapir’s scholarly and more artistic oeuvre where he grappled with the challenges of Jewish identity and Jewishness.

Instead of adjudicating between different forms of modern Jewish identities, this articleexplores how Boasian anthropology itself defined the tensions inherent within the Jewish origins of the discipline. For Boas, his colleagues, and his students, American Judaism was caught betwixt and between accepted categories of social and political life. For these anthropologists, while Jewishness could not be considered as a biological category, it was also not an entirely religious one either (Brink-Danan 2008: 676).

This paradigm persisted in American anthropology well into the twentieth century. Stanley Diamond, a student of Paul Radin,[[1]](#endnote-1) made reference to this phenomenon when he wrote, “For Jews, it is no longer an issue of being defined, but of defining themselves out of all conventional categories” (Diamond 1983: 5). For Diamond, a lack of cultural “holism” (Boyarin 2013: 86) jeopardized Jewishness and Jewish identity in the modern age. Responding to the question, “What is a Jew? Who am I?” Diamond wrote:

The answer: A people without a culture (a text is not a culture), without a society, haunted by archaic references, trying to live in abstractions…That, and the necessary dissimulation, constitute the agony (and irony) of Jewish life. (Diamond 1983: 1)

This article describes how Edward Sapir identified and implicitly responded to these tensions. In discussions of Sapir’s engagement with Jewish identity and anthropological thought, asking how modern Jewish identity could be defined for or imposed upon a passive subject in some essential way is far less revealing than inquiring into how the tensions among ethnic survival, dissimulation, and religious experience manifest themselves within anthropological writings (Feldman 2004: 111). For Sapir, in stark contrast to his Boasian colleagues, these tensions manifested themselves in covert ways, appearing between the lines of his poetic and anthropological texts. By identifying and these subtexts in his thought, scholars can better situate Sapir’s theoretical critique of Boasian anthropology against the backdrop of the pressing dilemmas of identity and assimilation faced by American Jewry in the first half of the twentieth century.

**Jewish Anthropology and Its Discontents**

In recent decades, a modest but distinct body of historical research has investigated the relationship between Judaism and the development of anthropological theory. Virginia Dominguez (1993), for example, has examined Judaism’s unique position within the theoretical and ethnographic corpus of the discipline, observing that “large numbers of American anthropologists come from Jewish families, yet very few of them have done any research or writing on Jews” (1993: 621–622). More recently, Brink-Danan (2008) has looked at the divergent ways in which Jewishness as a complex religious and ethno-biological grouping fails to be easily identified with traditional anthropological categories.

The difficulty in both defining and grappling with the Jewish vectors of anthropology indicates that the discipline’s Jewish roots and the routes through which it approached Judaism and Jewishness have generally been consigned to rumor, gossip, and hallway conversation, but only rarely to sustained historical analysis (Bunzl 2002, Dominguez 1993: 623, Feldman 2004: 120). Scholars have attributed this tendency to relegate Judaism and Jewishness to the margins of anthropological discourse to various factors. Some, like Eilberg-Schwartz (1990) and Goldberg (1995), have noted how anthropologists (including Jews among them) have been reticent to risk classifying Jews and Judaism as another item for study alongside the so-called primitive tribes that were once the focus of classical ethnographic studies.

Others have highlighted how the pressures of American antisemitism in the early twentieth century pushed anthropologists to minimize their own Jewish identities, even while they devoted more attention to the broader issues of racial equality and social justice. Yelvington (2000) and Lewis (2001) noted that Herskovits and Boas both eschewed distinct and particularistic definitions of Jewish identity in favor of a more universalist and assimilationist prognosis of Jewish dilemmas in the United States. Likewise, Glick (1982) demonstrated how Boas’s assimilationist attitude towards Jewish and African-American minorities in the United States stood in stark contrast to his lifelong project of preserving and documenting native American cultures and mores. Going further, Gelya Frank (1997) traced the strategies that Boas and his many Jewish students (Sapir included) used to express multiculturalist attitudes in ways that echoed their distinct political opposition toward scientific racism and antisemitism. In this way, scholars have shown how multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and the desire to be accepted into “white” America during the first decades of the twentieth century helped shape the broader development of American anthropological thought (Frank 1997: 737).

However, little attention has been given to a distinct emic discourse that also highlighted certain modes of Jewish national and religious particularity. By focusing solely on multicultural and cosmopolitan fidelities among the Jewish Boasian anthropologists, scholars have elided many of the very ambivalent moral feelings experienced by Jewish intellectuals concerning the nature, prospects, and costs of assimilation into wider American society.

Mobilizing the early theoretical language of queer studies approaches (Seidman 1998), some scholars have argued that anthropology’s “Jewish problem” (Feldman 2004: 108) has been “epistemologically closeted away” (Dominguez 1993: 623) from the understanding of the discipline’s theoretical underpinnings (Feldman 2004: 120). The issue has also been “closeted away” from some of the recent conversations on the Boasian legacies of race and color in American society.

Mark Anderson (2019) has noted that, for European immigrant anthropologists who arrived on American shores, the “price of whiteness” entailed their “participation in racism, particularly anti-black racism” (Anderson 2019: 4, Meade and Baldwin 1971: 213). Likewise, recent anthropological work has shown that the Boasian emigrant founders of American anthropology ultimately failed to displace the racialized hierarchies of the discipline (Cecil Jobson 2019: 7, Rana 2020, Visweswaran 2001).

While this insight is certainly true to some extent, it ignores how this “price of whiteness” (Goldstein 2006) for some Boasians of Jewish descent amounted to an almost complete elision of Jewish identity in general (and sometimes even of their own) from anthropological understanding (Boyarin 2013: 92). The Jewish emigres from Germany and Eastern Europe who helped to establish anthropology as a discipline in the United States certainly engaged in racialized discourse in their attempts to be accepted by the American scientific establishment. At the same time, they did so in ways that made Jewishness and Jewish experiences (dis)appear as mere ambivalent subtexts to broader cultural paradigms. This aspect of the Boasian legacy has yet to be explained and indeed, recognition of it is almost absent from the histories of the discipline to date. A renewed focus on Edward Sapir’s poetic and academic writings can add the necessary historical background to current discussions on Boasian engagement with issues of race, color, and minority status.

**Edward Sapir: A Life**

A renowned linguist, cultural theorist, social critic, and poet, Edward Sapir was born into an Orthodox Jewish family in Lauenburg in the German province of Pomerania in the winter of 1884 (Benedict 1939: 465). His father, Jacob David, served as an itinerant rabbi, ritual slaughterer, and cantor (Mandelbaum 1941: 131, Siskin 1986: 283). In 1890, after a brief stay in Liverpool, England, Edward’s family followed the myriad of other Eastern European Jewish immigrants on their way to the tenements of New York City’s Lower East Side. Secondary scholarship notes that Edward Sapir’s first language was Yiddish (unlike Boas), and from a very early age, he was introduced to Biblical Hebrew and Talmudic Aramaic, which perhaps influenced his later professional interest in Semitic languages (Darnell 1990, Handler 2011: 261, Malkiel 1986: 316).[[2]](#endnote-2)

As a poor Jewish immigrant child (Handler 2011: 261), Sapir “could depend on no inherited advantages of birth or position” (Benedict 1939: 465). He was able to pay for his higher education through scholarships, studying Germanic and Semitic languages, eventually falling under the wing of Franz Boas at Columbia in the first decade of the twentieth century (Boas 1939: 58, Mandelbaum 1941: 131). Upon receiving his doctorate, Sapir had some difficulty securing a full-time tenured position at an American university. As a result, in 1910, Sapir with his new wife, Florence Delson (née Zeidelson), moved to Ottawa, where he took up the post of Chief of the Division of Anthropology in the Geological Survey of Canada (Handler 1983: 212). Sapir remained in Canada for nearly 15 years until 1925, when he accepted the position of Associate Professor of Anthropology and Linguistics at the University of Chicago (Swadesh 1939: 134). There, Sapir rekindled his interest in the Indo-European and Semitic languages, which he would take to Yale, where in 1931 he accepted a position as the Sterling Professor of Anthropology and Linguistics (Benedict 1939: 468, Mandelbaum 1941: 132, Siskin 1986: 284).

By most accounts, Sapir was bored, lonely, and frustrated during his fifteen year sojourn in Canada (Newman 1986: 406). His wife, Florence, did not take well to the move, and after a long illness, she died in 1924, leaving Edward a widower with three young children to care for. Perhaps hoping to find some solace from the loss of his wife, as well as to assuage his feelings of guilt at her passing, Sapir began to consult with, the well-known American psychiatrist, Harry Stack Sullivan, even developing a close friendship with him (Newman 1986: 412, Perry 1982,). In 1926 Sapir remarried, this time to a non-Jewish woman named Jean McClenaghan, with whom he had two more children, Paul and Jacob David (the latter was likely named after Sapir’s own father, who died in 1931). Some scholars have set Sapir’s professional interest in psychology and individual personality pursued at Chicago and Yale against this drama of personal loss, professional advancement, and remarriage (Darnel 1986: 569, Macmillan 1989: 201). Along with Sapir’s interest in psychology emerged an intellectual investment, not only in Hebrew or Semitics, but also in the pressing challenges of identity and assimilation faced by American Jewry in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Undoubtedly, Sapir’s professional and perhaps personal interest in Jewish life, culture, and politics appears to predate his move to Chicago. In a letter to his friend and colleague Robert Lowie dated July 5, 1917, Sapir wrote:

Glad you like “The Jewish State Language” which I personally attach no importance to. I had sent it to N.A. Review but they said its subject was too remote. I don’t find it easy to get around editors! I may revise it slightly and send it to the “Jewish Quarterly,” which is a more technical journal then I originally had in mind. (Lowie 1965: 24)

There is no record that Sapir ever succeeded in publishing the “Jewish State Language.” Scholars have been unable to locate even a draft, and its theoretical or linguistic insights remain a mystery.[[3]](#endnote-3) However, Sapir’s assertion that he attached “no importance” to this essay was certainly overstated. Sapir kept an almost pedantic record of the submission and rejection history of his numerous essays and poems. The card for the “Jewish State Language” that is preserved at the American Philosophical Society reveals that the manuscript was submitted to and rejected by no less than twenty academic, popular, and Jewish outlets. Sapir’s apparently dogged attempts at publication certainly confirm for scholars the relatively early significance he placed on Jewish (and perhaps nationalist) concerns. Clues of this type within his writings can help provide greater insights into the ways in which Sapir both concealed and revealed his concerns for Jewish religious identity and ethnic continuity.

**Poetic Subtexts**

Sapir’s complex relationship between Jewish identity and anthropological theory (and, by extension, his own Jewishness) can be seen most clearly in two poems he composed in 1917 and 1928. Sapir’s linguistic playfulness imbued his poetry with the ability to comment on human experience in ways that academic social research, perhaps, could not (Benedict 1939: 468). Indeed, Sapir regularly experimented with poetry to present native positionality (Handler 1983, Nyce 1977).

Toni Flores (1986) has demonstrated how Sapir, through his poetry, was preoccupied with “creating masks of himself…by working through a series of important intellectual, moral and aesthetic preoccupations” (Flores 1986: 157). Likewise, for Sapir, the Jewish vectors of his anthropological thought were hinted at in veiled ways through the disparate yet surprisingly consistent subtexts of his writings. For Sapir, poetry offered a language and a medium through which he could grapple with the ambivalent moral weight of Jewish assimilation, set against his abiding commitment to the classical anthropological tenets of his Boasian colleagues. Thus, Sapir’s poetic oeuvre was intimately linked with his anthropological insights, ultimately forming a much “larger theoretical whole” (Flores 1986: 157).

One instructive poem illuminating this point underscores the personal complexities that emerged within an intimate relationship between a Jewish male and a gentile woman. Entitled “Involvement,” it was published in the *Menorah Journal* in July 1928 and, to date, has gone unnoticed by Sapir’s academic commentators:

While Aaron pontificates, brother of Moses,

And Cotton Mather storms with the word of the Lord,

Their progeny, sadly religion bored,

The lovely waywardness of love discloses.

For he is rapt in the yellow filmy hair

And finds in blue eyes what he might in brown,

And she is never tired of stroking down

His dark hair with a slow and graceful care.

Now were there God to pull the souls apart

That rushed together from the passionate heart

All through the unity of clinging flesh,

Then were it hard for him to disenmesh

Spirit from spirit and reassign to each

The embodiment the genealogies teach.

The poem first refers to the progeny of the Biblical Aaron and the American Puritan minister Cotton Mather, who are both “bored” with religion, find love within each other’s arms.

Surprisingly, Sapir identifies this interreligious love affair between a Jewish man and a Gentile woman by utilizing forms of racialized imagery (identifying “yellow filmy hair,” “finds in blue eyes what he might in brown,” and “Stroking down his dark hair,” for example) that would have made Sapir’s more orthodox Boasians blush. Visweswaran (2001: 71) has noted that Boasian anthropology tended to recognize racial differences in order to ultimately negate them. In this poem, however, written for a Jewish audience, Sapir, put a specific textual emphasis on familial and sexual relationships (in the phrases “brother of Moses,” “enmeshed souls,” and “the embodiment the genealogies teach”), perhaps anticipating a perspective on Jewishness and Jewish identity that suggest that it more closely resembles an anthropological understanding of kinship, rather than of race (Boyarin and Boyarin 1993, Kahn 2000: 160, Kahn 2005: 184, Seeman 2010: 47).

Sapir’s poem presents a subtle poetic accounting of the personal costs of Jewish assimilation when the two lovers cannot be returned to their genealogical locations. An earlier draft of the poem, entitled “Ignorant Love,” clearly alludes to the ignorance that this transgressive love affair had of the deep histories carried by the two sides of the tryst. The degree to which this dilemma was personal for him may be hinted at in a curious asymmetry hidden within the poem’s opening lines. There, Aaron is designated as the “brother of Moses,” but Cotton Mather is not given a separate reference. The Bible recounts that Aaron, as Moses’s High Priest, wore a special breastplate adorned with twelve stones, representing the twelve tribes of Israel (Exodus 28: 29). In the second row of Aaron’s breastplate was a sapphire stone —in Hebrew, a *sapir*.

As an expert in ancient Semitic languages and, specifically, in Biblical Hebrew (Sapir 1936; 1937), Sapir would have been quite aware of this linguistic context. As a widower with three children who had remarried in 1926 to a non-Jewish woman, we can speculate whether Sapir have written himself here into the subtext of his own poem. By all accounts, Sapir’s second marriage with Jean McClenaghan was a happy and fulfilled one (Benedict 1939: 468, Newman 1986: 413,), but these subtle subtexts in his poem perhaps reflect some of the ambiguity he may have experienced and a personal and social toll he possibly paid for Jewish assimilation into American life.

Through intelligent poetic wordplay and allusions to the Bible and to history, along with some salacious imagery, Sapir was deftly able to mask (or perhaps “closet”) the very real Jewish dilemmas that dwell between the lines of the text. However, these Jewish subtexts were certainly understood by his reading audience, or at the very least by the editor of the *Menorah Journal*, Henry Hurwitz, who, in a handwritten comment on an earlier draft of this poem, commmented, perhaps ironically, “did we ever pontificate?”[[4]](#endnote-4)

In another instance, Sapir used Jewish themes in his poetry to offer a subtextual critique of the cultural anthropology of his time. In this poem, “The Learned Jew,” published in 1917, Sapir offers a moving description of the inner spiritual and intellectual life of a scholarly Orthodox Jew.

In “The Learned Jew,” Sapir (1917: 20-21) describes a man who

Knew the Sabbath and the week-day rituals by heart

And in a trice could mumble off in prayer a dozen pages

Of the closest printed type, while thinking of his slender weekly gains.

…

He’d clean forget the reverence due a well-filled pocket-book –

Money’s a thing of earth, philology’s a thing of God!

With these lines, Sapir draws a contrast between the American capitalistic tendency to pursue material wealth and the study of philology and linguistics. He later expanded upon this critique in an essay published in the *American Mercury* in 1924, entitled “The Grammarian and his Language,” where he describes the study of philology in order to present a veiled critique of both American utilitarianism and secularism.

In this essay, Sapir highlights an American spirit of utilitarianism and rationalism “to the marrow of its bone” (Sapir 1924: 149). By contrast, he observes, the study of grammar and philology offers a non-utilitarian solution to the “riddles of the universe” (ibid. 153–154), in that it opens up vistas of relativistic human experience that might not otherwise be encountered. For Sapir, philology and linguistics were unique fields of study because each had the capacity to encompass the complete experience of the other.

Through a narration of the full inner experiences of the “learned Jew,” Sapir critiques an anthropology that is virtually ignorant, indeed, nearly illiterate, regarding the rich textual and linguistic traditions of its interlocutors (Boyarin 1991: 13, Seeman 2013,). The poem concludes with the following lines:

The Talmud was his dreamland refuge from the world.

What was his outward shell? What met the Gentile’s eye? Why, merely this: he kept a peanut stand on Hester Street.

The inner pietistic experience of the Learned Jew is completely lost to outside observers who are so invested in the outward physical expressions of cultural phenomena that they miss the pathos of the individual that is rooted in textual and traditional study.

This reading echoes a later letter Sapir wrote to Robert Lowie, offering some gentle criticism regarding the latter’s 1924 monograph “Primitive Religions” (Goldberg 2005). After gently chiding Lowie for not exhibiting an “emotional participation” in his subject matter, Sapir indicates that Lowie’s book focused too much on the externalities of religious form rather than developing “a true probe into the religious psychology of primitive religion” itself.

Sapir adds that if he had written the book, “which, needless to say, I do not dream of doing” it would have included a much heavier focus on such topics as “The Psychology of Ritual,” “Religious Ecstasy,” “Prayer,” and “The Religious Transvaluation of Experience.” In sum, “The sympathetic reader feels that you are heading all the time for religion, but somehow never quite get there” (Lowie 1926: 21).

Sapir’s skepticism of overly academic or distanced analyses of religion was also manifested in a similar review that he published in 1918 of an edited volume titled, *Religions of the Past and Present*. Here, Sapir’s criticism is harsh:

That cool academic spirit of objectivity that often makes one wonder why the study of religion makes an appeal to the scholarly mind at all. It is only in two of the chapters that one feels …that to the subject of religion may be brought an emotional interest differing somewhat from the orderly scientific curiosity which is customary to expend on paleoliths or the orbits of comets (Sapir 1918: 15).

Sapir’s skepticism concerning the objective study of religion also reflects his critique of the gentile observer, whose focus, fixed on the outward shell of Jewish cultural form, disregards the experience of Jewishness itself. While Sapir may have seen Jewish orthodoxy as petrified and dull, as discussed, between the lines, he seems to have found a long-sought-after “fresher atmosphere of intense spiritual experience” (Sapir 1918: 16), within the philological passions of his imagined Learned Jew.

This line of critique also echoes a larger divide between Sapir and his Boasian colleagues regarding the importance of cultural texts in ethnographic studies. For Sapir, focusing on “native” engagement with textual sources had the capacity to reveal “the unique life-world of individual members of particular cultures and allowed for the contextualization of individual lives within their cultures” (Darnell 1990: 140). This focus on individual meaning and experience, along with an unflinching belief in intra-cultural variability, separated Sapir from his classical Boasian peers, who sought to standardize grammatical expressions (ibid. 1990: 129), just as they reified the variability of individual experience into larger cultural wholes (Handler 1990: 260). With his poetic wordplay, Sapir masked a deep critique of the academic study of cultural forms rooted in individual experience by highlighting the transcendental usefulness of textual and philological study. This orientation toward individual experience was conditioned by an equally consistent interest in the dilemmas of Jewish identity and assimilation.

**The Individual Locus of Culture and Jewish Assimilation**

What became known as the Boasian school of anthropological research rested on a unique philosophical contradiction, wherein a large assortment of individual human experiences interact with the spiritual totality, or *geist*, of distinct sets of people (Handler 1983: 209, Stocking 1974: 8–9). While the “spirit of a people” is rooted within the individual “agents of history” (Bunzl 1996: 26), at the same time, that spirit transcends individuality to produce broader cultural wholes. The Boasians never truly reified cultural boundaries, considering them porous and open to “external influences” (Bashkow 2004: 445). At the same time, as Bunzl (2004: 440) notes, many of Boasians did indeed view cultural boundaries as “given rather than made.” That is to say, cultural boundaries were perceived as the outcome of broader historical processes that transcended or weakened individual agency.

In his well-known debate with Alfred Kroeber over the superorganic, Edward Sapir articulated a theoretical stance that was contrary to this interpretation of Boasian anthropology. For Kroeber, the concepts of culture or civilization were sui generis and transcended or existed beyond the actions individual actors. Early in his career, Kroeber worked to disassociate cultural phenomena from what he viewed as the intermittent and random workings of individual genius. As he observed, “Civilization as such begins only where the individual ends…But a thousand individuals do not make a society” (Kroeber 1917: 192–193). Sapir, on the other hand, could not so easily ignore “the peculiar influence of individuals on the course of history…it is always the individual that really acts and dreams and revolts” (Sapir 1917: 441–442).

While Sapir never explicitly mentions Judaism in his response to Kroeber, it is certainly instructive that his opposition to the superorganic emerged, at least in part, out of a consideration for the role religious charisma can play in the shaping of history. As he wrote:

I would not even hesitate to say that many a momentous cultural development or tendency, particularly in the religious and aesthetic spheres, is at last analysis a partial function or remote consequence ofthe temperamental peculiarities ofa significant personality. (Sapir 1917: 443)

Sapir perhaps betrays himself with his curious silence when, among all the religious revolutionaries whom he mobilizes to demonstrate this point, he fails to cite Moses, or indeed any historical or religious figure from the Jewish tradition. “One has only to think seriously of what such personalities as Aristotle, Jesus, Mahomet, Shakespeare, Goethe, Beethoven mean in the history of culture to hesitate to commit oneself to a completely non-individualistic interpretation ofhistory” (ibid.).

For Sapir, hidden within the subtexts of this debate around the superorganic was a concern for cultural assimilation into American society. Between 1882 and 1924, droves of Eastern European Jewish immigrants were arriving on the shores of the United States (Simon 1997: 3–4). Sapir’s individualistic concept of culture offered an anthropological approach that could be used to counter arguments of cultural determinism by addressing whether these immigrants would successfully assimilate into the wider American civilization.

In 1926 Sapir authored a lengthy review of Ludwig Lewisohn’s book, *Israel*, that bemoaned the assimilation of American Jewry and called for the resurgence of a Jewish nationalist spirit. Lewisohn observed that American Jews, on the one hand, were quick to divorce themselves of the more particularistic characteristics of their religion as a price of entry into American society. On the other hand, they were at the same time so fearful of rejection by that society that they only associated with other alienated Jews (Lewisohn, 1925: 472). This led American Jews to become just as estranged from their own religious past as they were from the contemporary society around them. Zionism, or Jewish nationalism, could be the one and only solution to this contradiction.

According to some accounts, Sapir accepted Lewisohn’s theory of Jewish alienation. Edgar E. Siskin noted that Sapir identified Judaism and Jewishness as a kind of *hapax legomenon*, or a word that appears only once in a linguistic set, among the nations of the world. That is, Jews and Judaism stand oddly out in America’s wider cultural tapestry (Siskin interview 32:10). In his review of Lewisohn’s work however, Sapir took issue with Lewisohn’s monolithic solution to this dilemma. In response, Sapir wrote:

Mr. Lewisohn is quite wrong, I believe, in ruling out assimilation as a solution of the Jewish problem… But he is perfectly correct in finding also another solution, for there is no reason whatever to believe that but one solution was preordained. … [T]he Zionist experiment to which Mr. Lewisohn pins his hopes is an admirable solution insofar as it satisfies the aspirations of many thousands of courageous Jews, inspired by a number of distinct motives… (Sapir 1926: 215)

In their reminiscences, Sapir’s students each Mandelbaum and Siskin read these lines very differently. Mandelbaum saw Sapir as calling for a universalistic Jewish tradition, “working through and with the social forces and forms about us” (Mandelbaum 1941: 139). Siskin, in contrast, read Sapir as presenting Zionism as an option of equal potential to that of assimilation (Fenton et.al 1986: 391). It is difficult to judge which interpretation might be the more accurate one; the disagreement itself indicates that Sapir may have expressed himself in different ways to different select groups of Jewish students.

During the 1930s, Sapir’s understanding of the individual as a unique shaper of history evolved into a sharper critique of the reified nature of the culture concept as such. “The true locus of culture,” Sapir enjoined:

[I]s in the interactions of specific individuals and, on the subjective side, in the world of meanings [such that it would be] impossible to think of any cultural pattern or set of cultural patterns which can in the literal sense of the word, be referred to society as such. (Sapir 1932: 236)

Rooting culture within individual experience set Sapir apart from Boas in terms of how Jewish identity ought to be experienced and expressed. Boas and Sapir never directly engaged one another in writing on issues of Jewish assimilation or cultural theory; indeed, by all accounts, the two had a difficult relationship. Meade (1973: xvii) described their association as “long,” “stormy,” and “embittered.” As Sapir characterized his relations with Boas to Ruth Benedict in 1925, “I have strayed from the paternal roof and no longer fear the Sire’s displeasure” (Mead 1973: 181). Indeed, one issue at stake in their stormy relationship may very well have been the unspoken reference to Jewish subtexts in their respective cultural theories.

While Boas’s anthropological interests led him to become a strong proponent of multiculturalism in his professional (Frank 1997) and his personal life, through his involvement in The Society for Ethical Culture (Opler 1967: 741), his focus on wider cultural patterns and groupings did not seem to extend to experiences of Jewish identity. Like many intellectual Jews of German origin in this period, throughout his career, Boas simply denied the possibility of a distinct Jewish existence (Glick 1982: 556) and strongly supported the goal of eventual assimilation into the larger American melting pot (Messer 1986: 128). Boas, in a discussion of intermarriage and anti-Semitism in America, predicted that “anti-Semitism will not disappear until the last vestige of the Jew as a Jew has disappeared” (Boas 1945 :81, Glick 1982: 556).

For Boas, when collective wholes are in struggle against one another, the resulting patchwork of culture would usually overshadow (in this case, in biological terms) or even erase particularistic cultural expressions. However, Sapir, by subverting the discourse of bounded cultural wholes in favor of individual experience, was able to recognize a wider and more diverse variety of legitimate Jewish responses to the pressing challenges of American modernity. This variety would, by all accounts, include Jewish nationalism and Zionism alongside assimilation. In contrast to Boas, Sapir’s consistent focus on the individual and psychological locus of culture allowed for this variety.

**Yiddishkeit: Genuine and Spurious**

These Jewish subtexts resonate further within an often-quoted essay entitled “Culture: Genuine and Spurious” that Sapir published in 1926, although he certainly had begun writing drafts of the essay as early as 1918 (Handler 2011: 267). Here, Sapir sought to present a typology of the ways in which cultural forms manifest themselves in social life to subvert “the conventional anthropological definition of culture toward a more individually variable one” (Darnell 2001: 18). Outwardly, Sapir sought to better understand the psychological dilemmas and social contradictions of modern American life, but in the subtext of his essay, he bemoaned the loss of a distinct form of Jewish American culture.

In this essay, Sapir dismisses the usage of the term culture, which highlights the accumulation of “socially inherited elements” (what Sapir termed civilization), as well as “individual refinement,” which pointed to a level of class standing (Sapir 1924: 402–403). Instead, Sapir focuses the majority of his critique on a third definition of the term, which highlights “those general attitudes, views of life, and specific manifestations of civilization that give a particular people its distinctive place in the world” (Sapir 1924: 405). In this more Boasian sense, culture acts as a “patterning of values that gives significance to the lives of people who hold them” (Handler 1983: 225).

For Sapir, however, the problem lay in the precise ways in which people make these broader patterns of value significant. This disjuncture creates two ways in which a Boasian conception of culture manifests itself within social life. In the first instance is what Sapir termed genuine culture, wherein cultural expressions are essentially “harmonious, balanced, self-satisfactory…[presenting a] unified and consistent attitude toward life…which sees the significance of any one element of civilization in its relation to all others” (Sapir 1924: 410). For Sapir, then, genuine cultural expressions are precisely those that are able to overcome the Boasian disjuncture between general patterns of value and the individual actors that make those patterns meaningful. On the other hand, spurious expressions of culture are those that magnify that disjuncture. They are “spiritually meaningless…[and create a] spiritual hybrid of contradictory patches, of water-tight compartments of consciousness that avoid participation in a harmonious synthesis ” (ibid.).

Anthropologists at the time either misunderstood or ignored Sapir’s typology of Boasian cultural forms. Ruth Benedict, for example, seemed to misunderstand Sapir’s profound theoretical skepticism regarding Boasian cultural wholes when she wrote to Mead objecting to what she considered the subjective aspects of his paradigm. After all, she noted, a culture’s “pretentiousness and hypocrisy might be because it had a most well-coordinated culture which expressed itself in that form” (Mead 1973: 325).

More recently, historians of anthropology have read Sapir’s essay as a meditation on authenticity (Saris 2012: 28–29) and a critique of American creativity and artistic expression (Handler 1989). Sapir’s essay, at least outwardly, does indeed highlight the ways in which modern American society, in its rationalization and technological output, deadens the more creative impulses of its citizenry. The essay itself is an anthropologically informed work of American cultural criticism that cast a deeply skeptical eye on the patrician and evolutionary understandings of American gentility (Clayton 1984, Handler 1989: 2, Sapir 1919). However, just beneath the surface, Sapir was also caught up in contemporary debates over the nature of Jewish culture and civilization.

Some of Sapir’s colleagues drew certain curious personal conclusions about the essay itself. Kroeber, for example, linked the essay to “the fact that [Sapir] was born abroad, he was born not only Jewish but the son of a Cantor, he must have been raised orthodox Jewish” (Kroeber 1984: 137). Continuing in a psychological vein, Kroeber contended that the essay was an expression of “wish fulfilment against the backdrop of a partly regretted career (ibid.). Similarly, David Mandelbaum considered the essay to be an affirmation of Sapir’s understanding of Jewish particularity (1941: 140). Notwithstanding these reactions, some aspects of the essay more specific to the Jewish context and its implications for the Jewish American dilemma in the interwar period, including issues of assimilation, have generally been overlooked by scholars.

Assimilation into American secular life was a central topic of discourse for Jewish intellectuals in the 1920s. When applied to Jewish assimilation within the United States, the term *Yiddishkeit* (the German/Yiddish cognate meaning Jewishness), as Handler noted (2011: 263–4), served as a Weberian model for Sapir’s theoretical formulation of genuine culture. Although Sapir himself never used this term himself (and it certainly was not part of the scholarly discourse of the era), the term’s meaning can be understood as a silent subtext between the lines of his writing. Sapir’s thoughts on a genuine or spurious cultures were conditioned by his deep ambivalence toward the process of Jewish assimilation into American social life. This ambivalence about a purported loss of *Yiddishkeit* can be better appreciated through a reading of “Culture Genuine and Spurious,” as well as a selection of articles that appeared in the *Menorah Journal* in the mid-1920s.

Founded in 1915 by the Intercollegiate Menorah Association, this monthly journal was meant to serve as an intellectual avenue through which Jewish ethnic solidarity could be expressed within a “secular academic environment” (Strauss 1996: 316). In addition to academic and popular opinion pieces, the journal also provided an artistic outlet for poetry and short stories (Krupnick 1979: 57). Through this medium the journal took a special interest in questions of Jewish assimilation and acculturation. Although Sapir was not a regular writer for the journal, he did publish a modest amount in its pages. Sapir was also in frequent written communication with its editor, Henry Hurwitz, who, in the mid-1920s, included Sapir (along with Paul Radin) on the journal’s lecture circuit to discuss the issue of Jewish assimilation, as well as Jewish psychology.

In the mid-1920s, the *Menorah Journal* published several pieces on the nature of Jewish integration into American social life. Among these was a chapter from Ludwig Lewisohn’s “Israel,” and an essay by the editor of the journal, Elliot Cohen, entitled “The Age of Brass.” Both these pieces explored different aspects of what they saw as the self-contradictory nature of Jewish American assimilation. In his essay, Cohen railed against the insincerity and lack of genuine commitment to traditional Jewish values and argued that vacuous celebrations of American materialism belie a dearth of religious and intellectual depth (Greene 2011: 18). “Our buildings in stone,” he chided, “rest on no deep and abiding Jewish values. We are a people who desire intensely to live but can find no rationale for continued existence” (Cohen 1925: 427–428).

Although Sapir’s work was composed a few months earlier than Cohen’s, in it, Sapir presented a similar critique of materialism and insincerity in the contrast of genuine to spurious culture. If genuine culture “builds for itself magnificent houses of worship,” Sapir wrote: It is because of the necessity it feels to symbolize in beautiful stone a religious impulse that is deep and vital; if it is ready to discard institutionalized religion, it is prepared also to dispense with the homes of institutionalized religion. (Sapir 1924: 410)

For Sapir, it was implicit in the concept of spurious culture that it both discarded the spiritual impulses of religion while retaining the materialistic facades of institutionalized religion.

In a related vein, Ludwig Lewisohn noted the ways in which the loss of the external ethnic and religious trappings of Judaism can alienate individual practitioners who nonetheless continue to experience a deep attachment to an undercurrent in Jewish peoplehood and religious identity. As Lewisohn wrote:

Our American friend of Jewish faith may be almost blond and straight nosed; he may be admirably like the majority in pronunciation and manner…yet when he sits at the head of his board the guests will be Levinskys and Rosenfelds; his table at his luncheon club … will hear voices in which the echo of the ancestral prayer and study-chant will still be audible. (Lewisohn 1925: 462—463)

In spite of adopting the external displays of American culture, Jewish assimilationists, Lewisohn argued, will forever experience the faint echo of the *Yiddishkeit* of their ancestors.

This view of Judaism as something that one can never quite part with resonates alongside the late-nineteenth-century Eastern European discourse of secular Jewish culture that highlighted what was understood to be the nearly unrecognizable spark of Jewish identity (Wisse 1995: 35). This *pintele Yid* (tiny Jew), as it is termed in Yiddish, was also referred to by Sapir in his essay on the “Meaning of Religion,” originally published in the *American Mercury* in 1928. In this article, Sapir critiques the Tylorean understanding of religion that emphasized evolutionary transitions to monotheistic and institutionalized expressions of faith, supporting instead a more personal and experiential consideration of how religion functions for and through individual personalities.

Sapir defines religion as “man’s never ceasing attempt to discover a road to spiritual serenity across the perplexities and dangers of daily life” (Sapir 1956 [1928]: 122). This definition anticipates Geertz’s focus on theodicy and cultural meaning (1973: 103) developed nearly four decades later, but Sapir ultimately locates the drive for spiritual serenity within the experiences of individual personalities. It is here that he identifies a silent subtext of religious experience within what he saw as the secularized and spurious nature of the modern era (Tumin 1985). Sapir asserted that:

[There exists] a wide distribution of certain sentiments or feelings which are of a peculiarly religious nature and which tend to persist even among the most sophisticated individuals, long after they have ceased to believe in the rationalized justification for these sentiments and feelings. (Sapir 1956 [1928]: 137)

For Sapir, like Lewisohn before him, certain religious feelings, which he later identifies as community, sanctity, and sin, remain submerged within modern individuals’ personalities. These feelings surface from time to time and, unlike spurious secularism, define the tenor of modern American life.

Of course, Sapir specifically references Judaism only once within this essay, and then only as one example of a formal institutionalized religion. Yet when read within their broader historical and cultural contexts, the Jewish concerns with assimilation and acculturation resonate soundly within Sapir’s sub-textual parallels between *Yiddishkeit* and genuine culture. For Sapir, both *Yiddishkeit* and genuine forms of authentic Jewish ethnic and religious identity are implicitly embedded within the personalities of individual Jewish actors. While recognizing that this Jewishness was located within the individual, however, Sapir avoided offering any future prognosis for the ultimate dilemma of Jewish assimilation within American society.

**Conclusion**

Sapir’s interest in Jewish dilemmas and his theoretical focus on individual experience were remarkably consistent; however, the connections he drew between the two were not. On the one hand, Sapir was deeply invested in a critique of reified and essential notions of culture. At the same time, his work also implies an independent essence to Jewish practices and ideas that can transcend the vicissitudes of individual experience.

Sapir’s death in 1939 at the relatively young age of 55 complicates our ability to satisfactorily resolve this apparent contradiction. Sapir never had the opportunity to reflect upon, coalesce, and record his thoughts and reminisces after a long and fruitful career, an opportunity that was granted to other well-known anthropologists (Fadiman 1939, Kroeber 1963, Meade 1995 [1972], 1973, Powdermaker 1966). It will always remain a mystery how Sapir himself may have addressed the dilemma.

Second, while Sapir advised many students, few followed in his theoretical path of emphasizing individual experience. As Ruth Benedict observed:

His strong conviction that the individual was uniquely important in cultural studies, however, did not lead him to train students to explore cultures through intensive observation of a series of divergent individuals in their sociological matrix. (Benedict 1939: 467)

Apart from a few scattered obituaries, interviews, and a festschrift of sorts published in the 1980s, his students refrained from drawing any connections between Sapir’s Jewish interests and his theoretical writings. Benedict’s own exploration of culture through the individual shows clearly that she did not really understand (and certainly did not agree with) Sapir’s implicit push to deconstruct the Boasian conception of cultural wholes. Darnell (1983) attributes Sapir’s relatively tepid intellectual reception among anthropologists to the vicissitudes of academic funding, and Bishop (2000) attributed it to Sapir’s eclectic intellectual interests. The religious and ethnic context of Sapir’s work, however, also played an important role in this issue. In many ways, Sapir lacked the appropriate language to adequately express his ambivalence regarding the overlapping roles of individual experience and Jewish identity in modern life in a way that would be acceptable his contemporary readers.

Most importantly though, Sapir died a few years before the beginning of one of the central dramas of modern Jewish history. Although he was deeply concerned by the growing specter of Nazism in Europe, Sapir did not live long enough to witness the Holocaust or the establishment of the State of Israel. We do not know, for example, how a post-war Sapir might have reacted to the abject rupture of the Jewish experience in Europe during the Holocaust, followed by its social, political, and religious reconstruction in both the United States and Israel.

This lacuna brings us no closer to addressing the complicated challenge of identifying Jewish themes and influences within the foundational writings of some of anthropology’s Jewish forebearers. However, it does underscore the need for historians of anthropological thought to become more attuned to the ways in which Jewish contexts can be used as a lens to better clarify the cultural theories of the seminal thinkers in the field.

Jewish ideas and Jewish identities are inevitably deeply linked with that tradition from which Boas, for example, struggled to escape. Sapir for his part, had a unique ability to closet away the personal and Jewish dimensions of his work in such a way as to both conceal and reveal them in an almost kaleidoscopic fashion within the varied contexts of his writing. He seems to have alluded to this in a 1929 letter to Ruth Benedict,

Life is so hard when one tries to be emotionally honest. It is much better to slip on the kind of spectacles that makes one see everything consistently cock-eyed and conventionally intelligible. (Mead 1973: 196)

In both his poetry and cultural criticism, Sapir offered a veiled and subtextual alternative approach through which he grappled with the two interconnected problems of individual experience and Jewish identity. In this instance, anthropological debates on Jewish themes were found not so much within the overt anthropological expressions of ethnographic description or cultural theory, but rather among the cracks and fissures within these theories. Specifically, this refers to the inner contradictions within Sapir’s corpus and how the duality with which he expressed his Jewish concerns mirrors how the history of anthropological thought has both concealed and revealed its own Jewish past and present.

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1. Radin (perhaps unbeknownst to himself) had much to thank Sapir for in championing his academic employment in the face of opposition from ardent opposition Boas, Kroeber, and Lowie. (Golla 1984: 229-230, see also Boyarin 2013: 83)

   [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Sapir’s father registered his name at birth in the German style as Eduard, with no reference to a Yiddish or Hebrew name (copy of birth certificate in possession of author). I have not found any primary evidence testifying to Sapir’s native language. Likewise, it is unclear if Malkiel wrote writing from experience or simply assumed that Sapir must have known Aramaic because he grew up in an Orthodox Jewish household. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. It is noteworthy that Sapir did not seem to have submitted the essay to any linguistic journals, leading one to believe that the essay tended to be more philosophical or political. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Henry Hurwitz Papers. American Jewish Archives. Box 52 Folder 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)