**“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 publications from academic, lay, and distinctly Jewish presses, 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 interspersed 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: Veiling 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 itself, the answer seems to have been liberation. 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 imply 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 (Glick. 1982, Lewis. 2001, Frank. 1997. Messer. 1986). The crux of the problem can be found here. 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 rest just beneath the surface of the writings of Edward Sapir, remembered as Boas’ most “brilliant and challenging student” (Benedict. 1939: 465, Handler. 1983: 208). Drawing on his 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 demonstrates how Sapir’s unique interpretation of Boasian cultural theory was conditioned by this concern for the prospects of Jewish ethnic, national, and religious survival in the United States. 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 the ways that 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. 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 considered that a largely “unobtrusive Jewish identity would do him no harm” (Darnell. 1991, Siskin, 1991: 2), as he advanced his careerby moving to Chicago to become an associate professor of anthropology. 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 (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett. 1996: 40, Boyarin. 2013: 93).

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 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 what he termed “the fresher atmosphere of intense spiritual experience” more broadly (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 contemporary 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 he 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).

For Siskin, Sapir was adept at veiling to some, and revealing to others his profound sensitivities to Jewish concerns. This article takes Siskin’s assertion seriously by following some of the subtexts in both Sapir’s scholarly and more artistic oeuvre where he grappled with the difficult issues of Jewish identity and Jewishness.

Rather than adjudicating between different forms of modern Jewish identities, this articleexplores how Boasian Anthropology itself defined the tensions inherent within the Jewish origins of their own discipline. For Boas, his colleagues, and students, American Judaism found itself caught betwixt and between the accepted categories of social and political life. For these anthropologists, while Jewishness could not be categorized as a “biological” entity, it could also not entirely be defined as a “religious” one either (Brink-Danan. 2008: 676).

This paradigm followed American Anthropology well into the 20th century. Stanley Diamond, a student of Paul Radin[[1]](#endnote-1), highlighted this issue 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), jeopardizes Jewishness and Jewish identity in the modern age. “What is a Jew? Who am I?” Diamond continued,

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 will explore how Edward Sapir identified and implicitly responded to these very same tensions. When talking about Sapir’s own engagement with Jewish identity and anthropological thought, it is less useful to ask, how modern Jewish identity might be defined or imposed upon a passive subject in some essential way, then to inquire into how do these tensions of 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 veiled ways between the lines of his poetic and anthropological writings. By teasing out these subtexts of 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 It’s Discontents**

In recent decades a modest but distinct body of historical research has interrogated the relationship between Judaism and the development of anthropological theory. Virginia Dominguez (1993) for example, has highlighted Judaism’s unique position within the theoretical and ethnographic corpus of the discipline when she observed how “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 to the discordant ways in which ‘Jewishness’ as a complex ‘religious’ as well as ‘ethno-biological’ grouping, fails to easily map onto traditional anthropological categories of study.

This difficulty in both defining and grappling with the Jewish vectors of anthropology, has meant that the discipline’s Jewish roots, and the routes through which it approaches Judaism and Jewishness have generally been consigned to rumor, gossip, and hallway conversation, and only rarely to sustained historical analysis (Bunzl. 2002, Feldman. 2004: 120, Dominguez, 1993: 623). 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 (Jewish anthropologists among them) were reticent to risk classifying ‘Jews’ and Judaism’ alongside the ‘primitive’ tribes that were once the focus of classical ethnographic studies.

Others have highlighted how the pressures of American antisemitism in the early 20th century pushed anthropologists to downplay their own Jewish identities, while at the same time focusing more on the broader issues of racial equality and social justice. For example, Yelvington (2000) and Lewis (2001) have noted how Herskovits and Boas respectively 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) has demonstrated how Boas’ assimilationist attitude towards Jewish and African American minorities in the United States stood in stark contrast to his life-long project of preserving and documenting native American cultures and mores. Going further, Gelya Frank (1997) traced the strategies through which Boas and his many Jewish students (Sapir included) expressed multiculturalist attitudes in ways that echoed their distinct political opposition towards scientific racism and antisemitism. In this way, scholars have shown how multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and the desire to be accepted into “white” America in the first decades of the 20th century helped shape the broader development of American anthropological thought (Frank. 1997: 737).

At the same time, little attention has been given to a distinct emic discourse highlighting certain modes of Jewish national and religious particularity. By focusing solely on the multicultural and cosmopolitan fidelities of 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 the wider American society.

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

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

While this insight is certainly true, it also ignores how this “price of whiteness” (Goldstein. 2006) for some of the Boasians of Jewish descent included an almost complete elision of Jewish identity (sometimes their own) from the anthropological canon (Boyarin. 2013: 92). The Jewish emigres from Germany and Eastern Europe who helped to establish the American discipline of anthropology, certainly engaged in racialized discourses 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 merely ambivalent subtexts to broader cultural paradigms. This part of the Boasian legacy has yet to be explained and indeed is almost absent from the extant histories of the discipline. A renewed focus on some of Edward Sapir’s poetic and academic writings, adds necessary historical background to current conversations concerning the 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 within the German province of Pomerania in the winter of 1884 (Benedict. 1939: 465). His father Jacob David, serving 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 myriads of other Eastern European Jewish immigrants to the tenements of New York City’s Lower East Side. Secondary scholarship notes how Edward Sapir’s first language was Yiddish (in contrast to Boas), and from a very early age was introduced to Biblical Hebrew and Talmudic Aramaic, which perhaps influenced his later professional interest in Semitics (Handler. 2011: 261, Darnell. 1990, 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 paid his way to higher education through scholarships, studying Germanics and Semitics and eventually falling under the wing of Franz Boas at Columbia in the first decade of the 20th century (Mandelbaum. 1941: 131, Boas. 1939: 58). Upon receiving his doctorate, Sapir had some difficulty securing a full-time tenured position in an American university. As such, 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 stayed in Canada for some 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 an interest in Indo-European and Semitic Languages that he would take with him to Yale, where in 1931 he accepted a position as the Sterling Professor of Anthropology and Linguistics (Benedict. 1939: 468, Siskin. 1986: 284, Mandelbaum. 1941: 132).

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 passed away in 1924, leaving Edward a widower with three young children to care for. Perhaps in a bid to find some solace in the loss of his wife, as well as to assuage feelings of guilt at her passing, Sapir began to consult – and indeed developed a friendship with - the well-known American psychiatrist, Harry Stack Sullivan (Perry. 1982, Newman. 1986: 412). Sapir remarried in 1926 to a non-Jewish woman named Jean McClenaghan, and had two subsequent children with her, Paul and Jacob David (seemingly named after his father who passed in 1931). Some scholars see Sapir’s professional interests in psychology and individual personality at Chicago and Yale as being set against this drama of personal loss, professional advancement, and remarriage (Macmillan. 1989: 201, Darnel. 1986: 569). What also seemed to emerge alongside this Sapir’s interest in psychology was an intellectual investment, not just in Hebrew or Semitics, but in the pressing challenges of identity and assimilation faced by American Jewry in the first decades of the 20th century.

To be sure Sapir’s professional and perhaps personal interest in Jewish life, culture, and politics seemed to predate his move to Chicago. In a letter to his friend and colleague Robert Lowie, dated July 5, 1917 Sapir noted,

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’. To date scholars have been unable to locate an extant copy of the draft essay, and it’s theoretical or linguistic insights remain a mystery[[3]](#endnote-3). Yet, Sapir’s assertion that he attached “*no importance*” to his essay “the Jewish State Language”, 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” preserved at the American Philosophical Society, reveals that the manuscript was submitted to - and subsequently rejected by - no less than twenty academic, popular, and Jewish presses. Sapir’s apparently dogged attempts at its successful publication certainly highlights for scholars the relatively early significance he placed on Jewish (and perhaps, nationalist) concerns. It is these kinds of subtextual clues within his writings that can be mobilized to shine a broader light on the ways in which Sapir chose to both reveal and veil his concerns for Jewish religious identity and ethnic continuity.

**Poetic Subtexts**

Sapir’s complex relationship between Jewish identity, and anthropological theory – and by extension of his own Jewishness - can be seen most clearly within two specific poems here composed in 1917 and 1928 respectively. Sapir’s ability to play with language gave his poetry an ability to comment on human experience in ways that perhaps more academic forms of social research could not (Benedict. 1939: 468), and Sapir regularly experimented with poetry to present native positionality (Nyce. 1977, Handler. 1983).

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. Poetry offered a language and a medium through which Sapir could grapple with the ambivalent moral weight of Jewish assimilation, set against his abiding commitment to the classical anthropological tenets of his Boasian colleagues. In this way Sapir’s poetic oeuvre alongside his anthropological insights are intimately linked in such a way as to form a much “larger theoretical whole” (Flores. 1986: 157).

One instructive poem to that effect underscores the personal complexities that emerge within an intimate relationship between a Jewish male and a gentile woman. Titled “Involvement”, it was published within the Menorah Journal in July of 1928 and 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 begins by referencing how the progeny of the Biblical Aaron and the Puritan minister Cotton Mather, who are both “bored” with religion, find love within the arms of one another.

Surprisingly, Sapir points to this interreligious love affair between a Jewish man and a Gentile woman by utilizing an aspect of racialized imagery (“*yellow filmy hair*”, “*blue eyes what he might in brown*”, “*Stroking down his dark hair*”) that would have made Sapir’s more orthodox Boasians blush. Visweswaran (2001: 71) has noted how Boasian anthropology tended to recognize racial differences in order to ultimately negate them. In a poem written for a Jewish audience however, Sapir, placed a specific textual focus on familial and sexual relationships *(“brother of Moses”, “enmeshed souls”, “embodiment the genealogies teach”*), perhaps anticipating a perspective on Jewishness and Jewish identity as more closely resembling anthropological understandings of kinship, rather than 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 respective “genealogical” locations. As highlighted by an earlier draft of the poem entitled “Ignorant Love”, Sapir alluded to how this transgressive love affair was ignorant of the deep histories that each side of the tryst carried. How personal this dilemma was for him may have been hinted at by a curious asymmetry hidden within the poem’s opening lines. Aaron is designated as the “brother of Moses”, while Cotton Mather is referenced alone. As Moses’ High Priest, the Bible recounts that Aaron wore a special breastplate adorned with twelve stones, each representing the twelve tribes of Israel (Exodus 28: 29). Laid into the second row of Aaron’s breastplate was a Sapphire stone – or in Hebrew, *Sapir*.

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

Through smart poetic wordplay, biblical and historical allusions, along with some salacious imagery Sapir was deftly able to veil ‘or closet’, the very real Jewish dilemmas that rest just between the lines of the text. These Jewish subtexts however were certainly understood by his reading audience, or at the very least by the editor of the Menorah Journal, Henry Hurwitz, who on a handwritten comment on a previous draft of the poem he noted perhaps somewhat ironically, “did we ever pontificate?”.[[4]](#endnote-4)

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

“The Learned Jew”, Sapir (1917: 20-21) describes,

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 contrasted between the American capitalistic tendency to pursue material wealth and the study of philology and linguistics. He would later expand upon this critique in an essay published in the American Mercury in 1924 titled “The Grammarian and his Language”, where he uses the study of philology to offer a veiled critique of both American utilitarianism and secularism.

In this essay, Sapir highlights an American spirit which is utilitarian and rationalistic “to the marrow of its bone” (Sapir. 1924: 149). By contrast, he observes, the study of grammar – and by extension philology – offers a non-utilitarian solution to the “riddles of the universe” (Ibid. 153-54) in that it opens up vistas of relativistic human experience that might otherwise be missed. For Sapir, philology and linguistics were unique fields of study because they each had the capacity to encompass the full experiences of the Other.

It is through the full inner experiences of the “learned Jew”, that Sapir critiques an anthropology that is nearly illiterate of the rich textual and linguistic traditions of its interlocutors (Seeman. 2013, Boyarin. 1991: 13). The poem concludes with the following,

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 may be so invested in the outward physical expressions of cultural phenomena that they miss the individual pathos that is rooted in textual and traditional study.

This reading echoes a later letter Sapir wrote to Robert Lowie offering some gentle criticisms over the latter’s 1924 monograph, “Primitive Religions” (Goldberg. 2005). After gently chiding Lowie for lacking an “emotional participation”, in his subject matter, Sapir notes how Lowie’s book focused too much on the externalities of religious form, rather “than a true probe into the religious psychology of primitive religion” itself.

Sapir goes on to write that were he to have authored 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”, Sapir wrote, “that you are heading all the time for religion, but somehow never quite get there” (Lowie. 1926: 21).

Sapir’s skepticism concerning overly academic, or distanced analyses of religion was also manifested in a similar review he authored in 1918 of an edited volume titled, ‘Religions of the Past and Present’. Here Sapir harshly criticizes

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 on the ‘outward shell’ of Jewish cultural form elides the very experience of Jewishness itself. While Sapir may have seen Jewish “orthodoxy” as ‘petrified’ and ‘dull’ (see above), between the lines he seems to have found that long sought after “fresher atmosphere of intense spiritual experience” (Sapir. 1918: 16), within the philological passions of the “Learned Jew”.

This kind of critique also echoes a larger divide between Sapir and his Boasian colleagues concerning the importance of cultural texts in ethnographic studies. For Sapir, a focus on “native” engagements 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). Through his poetic wordplay, Sapir masks a deep critique of studies of cultural forms over individual experience by highlighting the transcendental usefulness of textual and philological study. This focus on individual experience was conditioned by an equally consistent interest in dilemmas of Jewish identity and assimilation.

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

What became known as the Boasian school of anthropological research was the product of a unique philosophical contradiction wherein an 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), that spirit at the same time transcends individuality to produce broader cultural wholes. To be sure, the Boasians never truly reified cultural boundaries which were generally viewed as porous and open to “external influences” (Bashkow. 2004: 445). At the same time, as Bunzl (2004: 440) notes, many of the Boasians did indeed view cultural boundaries as “given rather than made”. That is to say, as the outcome of broader historical processes that transcend, or weaken, individual agency.

In his well-known debate with Alfred Kroeber over the ‘Superorganic’, Edward Sapir articulated a theoretical stance in opposition to this interpretation of Boasian anthropology. For Kroeber concepts such as ‘culture’ or ‘civilization’ were sui generis and can transcend or exist beyond the activities of individual actors. Early in his career Kroeber worked to disassociate cultural phenomena from what he viewed as the sometimes-random workings of individual genius. As he put it, “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 eliminate “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 overtly mentions Judaism in his response to Kroeber, it is certainly instructive that his opposition to the ‘superorganic’ emerged - 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 betrays a curious silence when of all the religious ‘revolutionaries’ he mobilizes to demonstrate this point, he fails to cite Moses, or any other 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 away within the subtexts of this debate around the superorganic was a concern for cultural assimilation within American society. Between 1882 and 1924 droves of Eastern European Jewish immigrants were arriving to the shores of the United States (Simon. 1997: 3-4). Sapir’s individualistic concept of culture offered one anthropological mode to counter arguments of cultural determinism by addressing whether these immigrants could successfully assimilate into the wider American ‘civilization’.

In 1926 Sapir authored a lengthy review Of Ludwig Lewisnsohn’s, ‘Israel’, a book which bemoaned the assimilated condition of American Jewry and called for a resurgence of a Jewish nationalist spirit. Lewisohn observed how American Jews, on the one hand, were quick to divorce themselves of the more particularistic character of their religion as a price of entry into American society. On the other hand, they were so fearful of rejection by that society that they only associated with other alienated Jews (Lewisohn , 1925: 472). In this way, American Jews had become just as estranged from their religious past as they were from contemporary society. Zionism, or Jewish nationalism, could be the one and only solution to this contradiction.

By some accounts, Sapir seemed to accept Lewisohn ’s theory of Jewish alienation. Edgar E Siskin has noted how Sapir had 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. The implication being Jews and Judaism stand oddly out amidst 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 the dilemma. As Sapir responded,

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

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

is 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).

Locating ‘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 and cultural theory, and by all accounts the relationship between the two was difficult. Meade (1973: xvii) had described their association as “long”, “stormy” and “embittered”. As Sapir wrote to Ruth Benedict in 1925 referring to Boas, “I have strayed from the paternal roof and no longer fear the Sire’s displeasure” (Mead. 1973: 181). Indeed, one of the issues at stake in their stormy relationship may very well have been the Jewish subtexts of their respective cultural theories.

While Boas’ anthropological interests led him to become a strong professional proponent of multiculturalism (Frank. 1997) and more personally with 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 at the time, Boas – throughout his career - denied the possibility of a distinct Jewish existence (Glick 1982: 556) and supported strongly the notion of eventual assimilation into the larger American melting pot (Messer. 1986: 128). As Boas noted regarding intermarriage and anti-Semitism in America, “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 struggle against one another, the resulting patchwork of culture would usually overshadow (in this case in biological terms), or even erase, particularistic Jewish cultural expressions. By subverting the discourse of bounded cultural wholes in favor of individual experience however, Sapir was able to recognize a more diverse variety of legitimate Jewish responses to the pressing challenges of American modernity. Such a variety would include by all accounts, Jewish nationalism, and Zionism alongside assimilation. Contra Boas, it was Sapir’s consistent focus on the individual and psychological locus of culture that allowed for such a variety.

**Yiddishkeit: Genuine and Spurious**

These Jewish subtexts resonate further within an often-quoted essay titled “Culture: Genuine and Spurious” published in 1926, although Sapir certainly began writing drafts of the essay as early as 1918 (Handler.2011: 267). In it, Sapir attempted to present a typology of the ways in which cultural forms manifest themselves in social life so as to subvert “the conventional anthropological definition of culture toward a more individually variable one” (Darnell. 2001: 18). While outwardly, Sapir was interested in attempting to better understand some of the psychological dilemmas and social contradictions of modern American life the subtexts of his essay bemoan the loss of a distinct form of Jewish American culture.

In the essay, Sapir dismisses usages of the term ‘culture’ that highlight the accumulation of ‘socially inherited elements” (what Sapir terms ‘civilization), as well as “individual refinement” which point to a specific level of class standing (Sapir. 1924: 402 - 403). Instead, Sapir focuses the majority of his critique on a third definition of the term that 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 rested in the precise ways in which people make these broader patterns of value significant. This disjuncture creates two separate ways in which a Boasian conception of ‘culture’ manifests itself within social life. In the first instance there is what Sapir termed ‘genuine’ culture. Here, cultural expressions are essentially “harmonious, balanced, self-satisfactory…[presenting a] unified and consistent attitude toward life a…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 one’s that are “spiritually meaningless …[and that create a] spiritual hybrid of contradictory patches, of water-tight compartments of consciousness that avoid participation in a harmonious synthesiss (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 the seemingly 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 anthropological thought have read this essay as a meditation on authenticity (Saris. 2012: 28-29), and a critique of American creativity and artistic expression (Handler. 1989). At least outwardly Sapir’s essay 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 stands as an anthropologically informed piece of American cultural criticism that cast a deeply skeptical eye on the patrician and evolutionary understandings of American gentility (Sapir. 1919, Clayton 1984, Handler. 1989:2). Yet slightly beneath the surface, Sapir was equally caught up in current debates over the nature of Jewish culture and civilization.

Some of Sapir’s contemporaries intuited certain curious personal characteristics 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). Likewise, David Mandelbaum noted how the essay was an affirmation of Sapir’s understanding of Jewish particularity (1941: 140). Despite these assertions, some of the essay’s more specific Jewish contexts and its implications for the Jewish American dilemmas in the interwar period – to include issues of assimilation - have been generally overlooked by scholars.

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

Founded in 1915 by the Intercollegiate Menorah Association, the monthly journal was meant to be an intellectual avenue through which Jewish ethnic solidarity could be satisfied within a “secular academic environment” (Strauss. 1996: 316). Alongside academic and popular opinion pieces, the journal also provided an artistic outlet for poetry and short storytelling (Krupnick. 1979: 57). Through this medium the journal took a special interest in issues of Jewish assimilation and acculturation. Although Sapir was not a regular writer, he did publish a modest corpus of material within the Menorah Journal. Sapir was also in frequent written communication with the Journal’s editor Henry Hurwitz who – in the mid-1920’s - placed him (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 1920’s the Menorah Journal published several pieces on the nature of Jewish immigration into American social life. Among these was a chapter from Ludwig Lewisohn ’s ‘Israel’, and an essay by the editor of the Journal itself - Elliot Cohen - titled The Age of Brass. Both essays explored various aspects of what they saw as the self-contradictory nature of Jewish American assimilation. In the latter, Cohen railed against the insincerity and lack of genuine commitment to traditional Jewish values and argued that vacuous celebrations of American materialism bely 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 composed a few months earlier, Sapir echoed a very similar critique of materialism and insincerity when he contrasted ‘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 the implicit nature of ‘spurious’ culture that both discards the more spiritual impulses of religion while retaining the materialistic facades of institutionalized religion.

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

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).

Despite adopting the external trappings 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 a distinct late 19th century Eastern European discourse of secular Jewish culture which highlighted what was understood to be, a near unrecognizable “spark” of Jewish identity (Wisse. 1995: 35). This *“Pintele Yid*” (tiny Jew) as it was called in Yiddish, was also expressed by Edward Sapir in his essay the ‘Meaning of Religion’ originally published in the American Mercury in 1928. In this article Sapir critiques Tylorean understandings of “religion” that highlight evolutionary transitions to monotheistic and institutionalized expressions of faith, and supported a more personal and experiential look at how religion functions on behalf of 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). While this definition anticipates Geertz’s (1973: 103) focus on theodicy and cultural meaning nearly four decades later, 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 notes 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 day individual personalities. These feelings surface from time to time and -as opposed to spurious secularism - define the tenor of modern American life.

To be sure, Sapir only specifically references Judaism 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 loudly within Sapir’s sub-textual parallels between Yiddishkeit and ‘Genuine’ culture. For Edward Sapir, Yiddishkeit or a ‘genuine’ form of authentic Jewish ethnic and religious identity was implicitly buried within the personalities of individual Jewish actors. By locating this Jewishness within the individual however Sapir refrained from offering any future prognosis to the ultimate dilemmas of Jewish assimilation within American society.

**Conclusion**

While Sapir’s interest in Jewish dilemmas along with his theoretical focus on individual experience was remarkably consistent, 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 that there is some 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 resolve this seeming contradiction in any satisfactory way. For one, Sapir never had the opportunity to reflect upon, coalesce, and record his thoughts and reminisces after a long and fruitful career as did some other well-known anthropologists (Fadiman. 1939; Meade. 1995 [1972]; 1973; Powdermaker. 1966; Kroeber. 1963). It remains a mystery how Sapir himself may have addressed the dilemma.

Secondly, While Sapir advised many students, few of them followed in his theoretical path of highlighting individual experience. As Ruth Benedict noted,

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).

Aside from a few scattered obituaries, interviews and a festschrift of sorts published in the 80’s, his students refrained from drawing any connections between Sapir’s Jewish interests and theoretical writings. Benedict’s own focus on the exploration of ‘culture’ through the individual reveals that she did not really understand (or certainly agree with) Sapir’s implicit push to deconstruct the Boasian conception of cultural wholes. Darnell (1983) relates Sapir’s relatively weak intellectual reception among anthropologists to the vicissitudes of academic funding, while Bishop (2000) attributed it to Sapir’s eclectic intellectual interests. The religious and ethnic contexts to Sapir’s work however also have an important role to play in this issue. In many ways Sapir lacked the appropriate language to properly express his ambivalent views regarding the overlapping roles of individual experience and Jewish identity in modern life in a way that would be acceptable to the readers of his era.

Most importantly though, Sapir passed away a few years prior to some of the central dramas of modern Jewish history. Although deeply concerned by the growing specter of Nazism in Europe, Sapir did not live long enough to see 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 it’s social, political and religious reconstruction in both America and Israel.

This lacuna brings us no closer to addressing the thorny problem of identifying Jewish themes and influences within the foundational writings of some of anthropology’s Jewish forebearers. Yet it does underscore the need for historians of anthropological thought to be somewhat more attuned to the ways in which Jewish contexts can be used as a lens to better understand the cultural theories of its seminal forebearers.

Jewish ideas and Jewish identities are caught within those shackles of tradition that Boas for example, tried so hard to escape from. Sapir however expressed a unique ability to “closet” away the personal and Jewish dimensions of his work, in such a way so as to both veil and reveal them in an almost kaleidoscopic fashion within the different contexts of his writing. As he seems to have alluded to 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).

Within both his poetry and cultural criticism, Sapir offered a veiled and subtextual alternative approach through which to grapple with the dual yet interconnected problems of individual experience and Jewish identity. In this instance, anthropological debates around Jewish themes can be found not so much within the overt expressions of ethnographic description or cultural theory but rather within the cracks and fissures of those theories. That is to say, the inner contradictions within Sapir’s corpus, and the ways in which he both veiled and revealed his Jewish concerns mirror how the history of anthropological thought has both veiled and revealed its own Jewish past and present.

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1. Radin (perhaps unbeknownst to himself) had much to thank Sapir 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 birth in German 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 ‘mother tongue’. Likewise, it is unclear if Malkiel is writing from experience, or he is simply assuming 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 nature of the essay was more philosophical or political. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Henry Hurwitz Papers. American Jewish Archives. Box 52 Folder 1 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)