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John L. Jackson, Jr.. *Thin Description: Ethnography and the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013. x + 394 pp.

It is telling that *Thin Description: Ethnography and the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem*, a monograph that so blatantly defies ethnographic convention,opens on an airplane en route to the Holy Land. As John Jackson later details, the classical anthropological trope of the “arrival scene” is an authenticating gesture, but one that finds little purchase in social worlds that abound with digital media technologies and accompanying “field-sites…[that] come knocking at our doors or flitting across our computer screens” (2013:48). In lieu of an arrival, the reader is made privy to a departurein a number of respects. By situating us in the cabin of a jetliner, Jackson makes clear that he has departed from the comforts of place, and along with it the comforts of an ethnographic paradigm that confers upon the anthropologist a divine right to interpretation.

As Jackson delves further into the mythos and idiosyncrasies of various Hebrew Israelite communities, it becomes apparent that there is no more appropriate place to begin than the shock of *in medias res*. Just as an airplane is a nonplace situated betwixt disparate geographies, bureaucratic zones, and juridical authorities, the multifarious assemblages of African Hebrew Israelites are equally of this nonplace, lacking a verifiable ontology or site of originary belonging. Anthropology has long been preoccupied with the question of origins, seeking out communities of authentic natives that are subsequently captured by the ossifying gaze of ethnographic representation. In their failure to conform to these rigid expectations, African Hebrew Israelites have remained conveniently hidden from anthropological view. Not only do the Hebrew Israelites resist the picturesque archetype of the uncompromising native, they explicitly dispute the privileged perch of anthropologists as purveyors of truth-claims. In *Thin Description*, it is the Ivy League anthropologist who is subjected to truth-claims regarding the origins of black peoples in the Americas—who as one strand of Hebrew Israelites protest, hail from Israel, not Africa—and their own divine inheritance.

While navigating the pages of *Thin Description* and its meanderings between rich anecdotes of African Hebrew Israelite sociality and measured reflections on ethnographic methods, theory, and representation, one begins to imagine a copy of the book finding its way past the pearly gates and into the hands of a long-deceased structural functionalist, who tosses the book aside in disgust. “But where is the ethnography,” he would beckon, “can’t Jackson simply get to the point?” Yet, this confusion bordering on anger is precisely what I believe Jackson hopes to evoke by approaching the African Hebrew Israelites not as an obscure community of zealouts, but as a foil for the seemingly irrational investments and rituals deemed sacred under the banner of anthropology.

Mainstays of anthropological theory such as Clifford Geertz’s *The Interpretation of Cultures* and Bronislaw Malinowski’s *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* are the obvious companions to *Thin Description*, which thrives in its meta-critique of the ethnographic imagination. Hailed for their iconic statements on ethnographic methods, Geertz and Malinowski are not crudely dismissed here as peddlers of outmoded approaches. For instance, Malinowski’s emphasis on participant-observation—that the ethnographer descend from his privileged perch to “live…right among the natives” (Malinowski 1961[1922]:6)—remains the central feature of Jackson’s methodological toolkit. And, the provocative title notwithstanding, Geertz’s trademark interpretive mechanism of thick description is not discarded (see Geertz 1973). Much of what is found in the pages of *Thin Description* would qualify as “thick,” even in the eyes of the most conservative anthropological critics. What separates Jackson from Geertz is his constant yet productive skepticism of his own interpretive faculties.

Those familiar with his wider oeuvre will recognize this skepticism from the chronicle of crippling fieldwork anxiety that prefaces *Harlemworld* and his tortured efforts to make ethnographic sense of spirit possession in *Real Black*. One might say, then, that Jackson has made a career of selling trade secrets of the anthropological fraternity, namely that we have never been the privileged and seamless codebreakers that we describe ourselves as—or believe ourselves to be. Thick description, though admirable as a methodological ideal, is revealed as a closely-held belief mired in the very magic and witchcraft that anthropologists such as Malinowski and E.E. Evans-Pritchard ascribed to the Trobriand Islanders and the Azande (see Evans-Pritchard 1976[1937]; Malinowski 1978[1935]). As Jackson observes, “These aspirations and characterizations signal some of the hubris at the center of the anthropological project, a hubris that has probably always imagined ethnographic thickness to be far thicker than it actually is” (2013:14). To deduce the difference between an involuntary twitch and a wink, as Geertz asserts thick description enables, is to act as a sorcerer, conjuring meaning from a murky void of uncertainty.

Anthropologists, as steadfast defenders of science and reason, and African Hebrew Israelites, as eccentric proselytizers, thus emerge in the pages of *Thin Description* as unlikely, but merited companions. Take the following passage:

The AHIJ constantly affirm their “power to define,” a commitment to renaming objects and ideas in direct opposition to standard definitions. This “power to define” is central to their entire global agenda and spiritual mission. They aim to redefine what it means to be African, what it means to be Jewish, and even what it means to be human. Attempting to rewrite the very science of human life, the basic parameters of our existence, requires that everything we say, think, and do (no matter how casual and seemingly unremarkable) becomes fodder for purposeful reconceptualization, for daily deconstruction, starting with language itself— each ­ word reconsidered, every phrase carefully parsed. (Jackson 2013:6)

The point, of course, is that the passage cited could as easily be attributed to the eccentric cult of anthropology as the African Hebrew Israelites. A similar critique was recently launched by the “ontological turn” in anthropological theory, which holds that anthropology has misguidedly sought to translate indigenous cosmologies into legible and compartmentalized terms of reference. For proponents of the ontological turn, anthropology must shirk this imperative of translation, accepting instead that its “constitutive role…is not that of *explaining the world of the other*, but rather of *multiplying our world*” (de Castro 2013:492). In its growing bibliography, though, the world of the anthropologist and his explanatory mechanism remains uncomplicated. By simply acknowledging the proliferation of other worlds and their disparate cosmologies, the primacy of scientific rationality (or as Bruno Latour has it, the “modern cult of the factish gods” (2010)), they argue, will be productively decentered.

Jackson provides an alternative, and in my estimation, a more ambitious proposal. What if, rather than asserting the existence of multiple coexisting ontologies, the continued investment in ontology itself was abandoned? As Frantz Fanon reminds us, “Ontology does not allow us to understand the being of the black man…For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man” (2008:90). Rather than seeking to rescue the ontological status of the colonized, Fanon seeks a new grammar from which novel modes of human existence can be derived. While it proves difficult to fully decipher this grammar even in a close reading of Fanon, Jackson’s framework of sincerity—which first appears in *Real Black*—can be understood as an admirable effort to rise occasion that Fanon prescribes. Ethnographic sincerity, like racial sincerity before it, is modest enough in its proposal. Quite simply, it demands a healthy dose of reality. To practice sincerity, which “recognizes the irredeemable misrecognitions that constitute and confound all social interactions, even those cultivated by ethnographers in the field” (Jackson 2013:211), is to truly embrace the mantra that “everything is ethnography” (Ibid:53). It is to be less guarded in revealing the inner demons and insecurities that haunt our prose, to indulge moments that defy the logics and expectations of our academic training, and to leave some loose ends untied. It is in its own failings that the radical potential of ethnography waits to be unlocked.

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