

Laura Arnold Leibman, *Once We Were Slaves: The Extraordinary Journey of a Multiracial Jewish Family*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. xvi + 294 pp. (Cloth US\$ 27.95)

The past two decades have seen the emergence of a rich historiography of Caribbean Jewry. Alongside Aviva Ben-Ur's recent history of Jewish Suriname, Laura Leibman's essential new biography of two nineteenth-century Barbadian Jews of color marks an important paradigm shift in this scholarly discussion. If studies of Caribbean Jewry initially sought to establish the centrality of the Caribbean within the story of early American Jews, Leibman and Ben-Ur center slavery and Jews of color within that story. Confronting head-on Jews' complex implication in the plantation system, they focus attention on the population of Jews of color that resulted and on their struggle for social mobility and equality. Moving well beyond earlier apologist narratives that presented Jewish slaveholders as more benevolent than their Christian counterparts, Leibman in particular privileges the perspectives of enslaved and free people of African ancestry as well as Jews of color.

While studies of Caribbean Jewry have tended to address a particular colony and community, Leibman takes a different tack by recovering the biographies of two little known members of an illustrious Sephardic Jewish family: Sarah Brandon Moses and her brother Isaac Lopez Brandon. Sarah and Isaac were born enslaved in late eighteenth-century Barbados to the Christian concubine of a Sephardic Jew named Abraham Rodrigues Brandon. Leibman's biographical lens allows readers to travel with the siblings across a series of locales, in keeping with the mobility of "port Jews" and their transnational familial and mercantile networks. Over the course of 12 chronologically ordered chapters, we follow them as they move between Barbados, Suriname, England, and the United States. This transnational framing reveals how definitions of race and Jewish communal membership varied across different colonial sites.

Once We Were Slaves is a story of transformation; it documents how Sarah and Isaac repeatedly refashioned themselves in order to secure social mobility and greater control over their lives. Leibman identifies a variety of mechanisms that enabled them to rise through the ranks of early Jewish American society, including manumission, conversion, inheritance, education, clothing, portraiture, and marriage. Thus by moving to Suriname, where (unlike in Barbados) people of color could convert to Judaism, the siblings were able to join the *nação* (Jews of the Portuguese nation). Subsequently, the genteel Jewish education Sarah acquired in England helped to ensure her social success in the United States. By contrast, Isaac struggled to find social acceptance in Barbados, where in 1821 he was stripped of his voting membership in the *Nidhe Israel*

congregation because of his “mulatto” status, regaining it only when restrictions on the rights of propertied free men of color in Barbados were lifted in the 1830s.

In order to reconstruct these experiences, Leibman had to overcome the bias of the archive, which erases the perspectives of the enslaved and distorts their stories. Like other historians of the Jewish Caribbean, she relies heavily on wills, reading between the lines to glean traces of the siblings’ lives. Yet she supplements this source base with detailed attention to material and visual culture, opening her richly illustrated study with daguerrotypes and ivory miniature portraits that were a key technology of self-fashioning and whitening. Her nuanced visual analysis of these portraits as well as objects such as a teacup depicting a colonial picturesque Surinamese Jewish scene help to offset the limitations of the textual archive.

Leibman is not only an indefatigable researcher but also a wonderful storyteller. She brings to life the various eighteenth- and nineteenth-century locales in which Sarah and Isaac lived through vivid narration that is at times almost novelistic. As she moves across these locales, she attends carefully to both their Black and Jewish inhabitants, emphasizing the spatial proximity, the contact, and the cross-over between these communities. In so doing, she exposes a major blind spot in the field of Jewish studies, which has “writ[ten] Jews of colour out of the story of American Judaism” (p. 180). While positioned as a corrective to the racial bias of earlier histories of Jews in the colonial Americas, Leibman’s analysis also demonstrates the significance of Jewishness for the field of Caribbean studies, revealing how Jewishness figured in the struggle for civil rights among enslaved and free people in the colonial period. Indeed, as she notes, “Sarah and Isaac’s ability to change their lives and their designated race ... tells us as much about the early history of race in the Atlantic world as it does about the lives of early American Jews” (p. xiv).

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