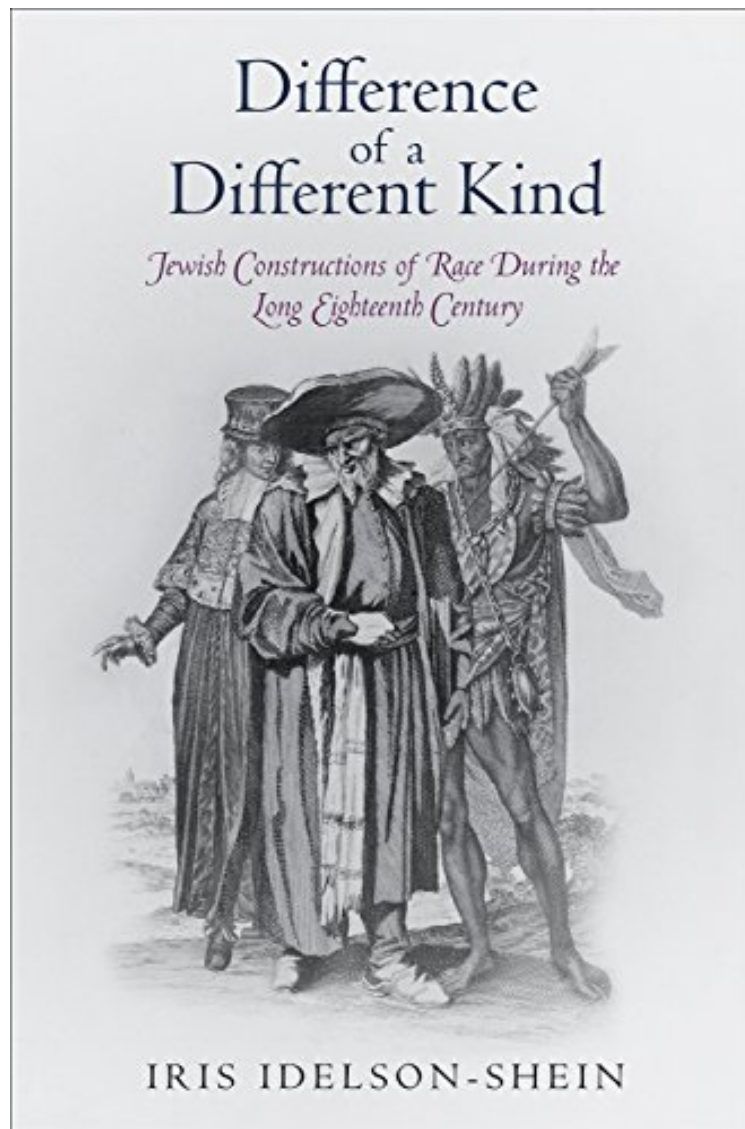


[Free pdf] Difference of a Different Kind: Jewish Constructions of Race During the Long Eighteenth Century (Jewish Culture and Contexts)

Difference of a Different Kind: Jewish Constructions of Race During the Long Eighteenth Century (Jewish Culture and Contexts)

Iris Idelson-Shein

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Century (Jewish Culture and Contexts):

European Jews, argues Iris Idelson-Shein, occupied a particular place in the development of modern racial discourse during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Simultaneously inhabitants and outsiders in Europe, considered both foreign and familiar, Jews adopted a complex perspective on otherness and race. Often themselves the objects of anthropological scrutiny, they internalized, adapted, and revised the emerging discourse of racial difference to meet their own ends. *Difference of a Different Kind* explores Jewish perceptions and representations of otherness during the formative period in the history of racial thought. Drawing on a wide range of sources, including philosophical and scientific works, halakhic literature, and folktales, Idelson-Shein unfolds the myriad ways in which eighteenth-century Jews imagined the "exotic Other" and how the evolving discourse of racial difference played into the construction of their own identities. *Difference of a Different Kind* offers an invaluable view into the ways new religious, cultural, and racial identities were imagined and formed at the outset of modernity.

"Iris Idelson-Shein gives us a window into a far richer and much more dynamic interplay between the Jewish and the non-Jewish world than what one finds in most scholarship on the Haskalah. She contextualizes her readings with exemplary rigor, breadth, and elegance. Idelson-Shein's prose truly sparkles, and each of the chapters is a sheer pleasure to read, full of narrative drive, stylistic sophistication, and conceptual subtlety. *Difference of a Different Kind* is a powerful book that delivers an original argument in a lucid and elegant manner." Jonathan Hess, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill "A welcome addition. . . . This book focuses on the Jewish attitude toward race as it evolved in the so-called long eighteenth century, mostly during the Jewish Enlightenment of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries." American Historical "A substantial and well-researched study of the complexities of racial thinking in the European Jewish Enlightenment. Iris Idelson-Shein covers an extraordinary range of topics: rape, infanticide, the savage, hirsute peoples, miscegenation, children's books, issues of translation, and the formation of scientific racism." Felicity Nussbaum, University of California, Los Angeles About the Author Iris Idelson-Shein is Alexander von Humboldt Research Fellow at the Martin Buber Professor für Jüdische Religionsphilosophie, Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Introduction There is an amusing scene in V. S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*, in which Ralph Singh, a Caribbean immigrant in London, describes his impression of his English landlord, Mr. Shylock: "For Mr. Shylock . . . I had nothing but admiration. I was not used to the social modes of London or to the physiognomy and complexions of the North, and I thought Mr. Shylock looked distinguished. . . . He had the habit of stroking the lobe of his ear and inclining his head to listen. I thought the gesture was attractive; I copied it. I knew of recent events in Europe; they tormented me; and . . . I offered Mr. Shylock my fullest, silent compassion." Naipaul's portrayal of the enthusiastic young immigrant, who has his heart set on becoming a true Englishman, is, of course, ripe with irony. But there is also something unsettling in this description; as we, the readers, cannot help but notice that Singh's object of admiration is not a true Englishman at all, one graced with "the physiognomy and complexions of the North." Rather, Singh's landlord is a Jew, and not just any Jew at that, but one named after the archetypal "ugly Jew" of English literature Shakespeare's Shylock. Indeed, the man Singh is trying to mimic in order to become an authentic Englishman is in himself a "mimic man." The irony inherent in the situation reaches its climax toward the end of the paragraph, with Singh's implied reference to the Shoah. Here, the tables are suddenly turned, and the Jewish landlord's mimicry assumes center stage, announcing itself most clearly. Naipaul's short episode offers a tantalizing expression of the dilemma inherent in the "Jewish situation" in Europe. Throughout the history of Europe, Jews have occupied a sensitive location at the discursive crossroads of "sameness" and "otherness." To adapt Homi Bhabha's terminology, they have often been considered "almost the same, but not quite." This ambivalence of Jewish ethnicity goes back all the way to the thought of azal, the ancient Jewish sages. In the canonical text of the Mishnah (the first compendium of rabbinic tradition, c. 200 c.e.), it is noted: "An intense brightness in the German is dark, and the darkness of the Kushite is intense, [but] the Children of Israel are . . . neither black nor white, but in between" (Mishnah, *Negaim* 2:1). Over the years, this "in-between-ness" of the Jews, with its religious, cultural, political, and historical implications, has received a great deal of scholarly attention. Historians, anthropologists, theologians, and others have dedicated studies to exploring the Jews' ambivalent status in Europe; their political and social marginalization have been studied rigorously, the Janus-faced and often tormented relationship between Jews and Christians has preoccupied scholars throughout the ages, and the question of Jewish otherness, uniqueness, or difference continues to excite the imagination of many of our own contemporaries. In contrast, however, to this scholarly enticement with the question of Jewish-Christian relations, very little attention has been given to the other side of Jewish "otherness," so to speak. The question of Jewish perceptions and representations of other Others, and their relationships with them, has been virtually neglected by historians. This scholarly tendency to overlook the question of Jewish agency in the history of race conveys a preconception of what race history indeed, what race is all about. It is motivated by two dominant historiographical paradigms: the "colonial paradigm" on the one

hand and the "antisemitism paradigm" on the other. The colonial paradigm presupposes that there exists an inherent link between the emergence of race and the histories of colonialism and slavery. According to this formulation, the modern concept of race was invented sometime during the early modern period as a means to justify colonial expansion and plantation slavery. It was then imported into Europe, where it was subsequently applied to various groups that were not enslaved, such as the Jews, the Sami, or the Roma. The outcome of this kind of understanding of the history of race is a tendency to downplay or overlook the intense preoccupation with questions of difference in non-colonial countries, or amongst non-hegemonic groups, such as women or Jews. The past few decades, however, have witnessed a growing dissatisfaction with this scholarly approach. A large corpus of studies has shown that the emergence of racist thought was closely linked to the emergence of other types of biological determinism, such as modern conceptions of gender and childhood. Indeed, racist imagery was often used in order to discuss precisely these other identity groups, and not necessarily in order to convey colonialist messages. In light of this new historiographical trend, more and more research has been dedicated to the study of racial imagery in non-colonialist countries. In addition, scholars have also begun to devote attention to the uses and representations of race amongst non-hegemonic groups, and particularly amongst women. However, these new historiographical trends have somehow overlooked the Jews. Only a handful of studies have been dedicated to the exploration of Jewish attitudes toward race in early modern Europe, and, of these, none have devoted significant attention to the long eighteenth century (as the period between 1660 and 1830 is often called), which is widely considered a formative period in the history of race. But, of course, Jews have never really been excluded from the history of race. Quite the contrary: they are widely considered to be some of the primary victims of racialist or racist thought. Numerous studies have attempted to unravel the history of antisemitism, of racist or protoracist attitudes and practices toward Jews. These studies focus on different periods and regions, and offer a wide variety of perspectives and methods, and yet they all seem to share the assumption that in regard to the history of race, Jews are always passive objects of racialist thought and hardly ever its subjects. The reasons for this one-dimensional portrayal of Jews by historians of racial discourse are manifold. Amongst other considerations, they have to do with the traditional distinction between "Jewish" and "general" histories, and the tendency exhibited by scholars of European history to view European Jewish history as "somebody else's business," as it were, an issue to be dealt with by scholars of Jewish history. Clearly, there is also a political aspect to the reluctance to study Jews as active agents in the history of race, which has to do with the understanding of Jewish history as a history of persecution in Diaspora and subsequent liberation in the land of Israel. This metanarrative of Jewish history dictates an image of the Jews as a persecuted minority that is so strong it completely overshadows other possible images. This, then, is the lacuna the present book aims to fill. My fundamental premise throughout this study has been that, contrary to their traditional portrayal as mere objects of racialist discourse, European Jews' attitudes toward non-European peoples offer a compelling platform for the study of the history of race in general and in the eighteenth century in particular. Indeed, from their unique vantage point at the central nervous system of European identity, eighteenth-century Jews afford an invaluable view into the ways in which, upon the threshold of modernity, new religious, cultural, and racial identities were imagined and formed. In what follows, then, I attempt to unfold the ways in which those "intimate Others," the Jews, who were the objects of anthropological scrutiny, internalized, adapted, and revised the emerging modern discourse of difference to meet their own ends, and the various roles this discourse played in their perception of the "exotic Other," the "hegemonic Other," and the construction of their own identity. Were European Jews, indeed, "chameleons" as claimed by Dutch philosopher Isaac de Pinto who merely assumed the philosophy, culture, and values of their surrounding environments? Were they simply passive recipients of the dominant discourse on identity and alterity, or did they articulate their own unique notions of difference, ethnicity, race, and selfhood? Of the few studies that have addressed the question of Jewish representations of non-Europeans, almost all have focused on the relationships between Jews and Blacks from ancient times and into the modern period. The vast majority of these studies view Jewish attitudes toward race through a colonialist prism, and ignore such fundamental questions as the connection between notions of gender and race; the Jewish uses of non-European peoples as a means for self-reflection; or the widespread Jewish tendency to utilize the image of the non-European as a means to discuss Jewish-Christian relations. The ensuing result is a small corpus of studies focused almost exclusively on colonial Jews, while ignoring European Jews in general and Ashkenazi Jews (Jews of Western, Eastern, or Central European descent) in particular. An important exception is Jonathan Schorsch's 2004 *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World*. In this seminal work, Schorsch exhibits a keen awareness of the introspective aspect of Jewish discourse on the colonial Other. Indeed, one of the book's primary arguments is that throughout the early modern period, "Blacks served Jewish authors . . . as a rhetorical foil against which their own whiteness shone forth." And yet, unavoidably perhaps, Schorsch's ambitious study, which covers a period of 350 years, has a certain ahistorical quality to it. This is most clearly expressed in the author's characterization of Jewish (and, for that matter, general) discourse on Blacks as almost unchanging throughout the period, a discourse marked by "a remarkable stasis." I would suggest, however, that the static nature of early modern racialism identified by Schorsch is an outcome of the choice to focus on the issue of skin color a tendency shared by the vast majority of researchers in the field of Jewish racial thought. In fact, it is difficult to see why previous scholarship has focused almost exclusively on Jewish attitudes toward Blacks

when most early modern Jewish texts do little to discriminate between Blacks and other non-European peoples, who are most often lumped together under the highly ambiguous term "savages." The term was something of a floating signifier in eighteenth-century literature, and like so many other eighteenth-century terms, it is virtually impossible to pin down. Contemporaries often used it to denote Native Americans, Africans, South-Sea Islanders, at times even Chinese or Jews (particularly, East European Jews). Still, notwithstanding its ambiguities, savagery was the most basic category of eighteenth-century anthropology. The scholarly focus on Jewish-Black relations appears therefore to be an anachronism, a symptom perhaps of what Roxann Wheeler has diagnosed as "our current preoccupation with chromatism," which in much contemporary research "is reproduced rather than challenged by historical difference." And yet, as I demonstrate throughout the present study, at least up until the late eighteenth century, skin color did not play a significant role in European Jews' depictions of other peoples. In fact, most eighteenth-century Ashkenazi writings on "exotic peoples" tended to associate the physical appearance and cultural practices of these peoples with the different climates in which they lived, or with their different nutritional practices. Accordingly, in most cases the opposition between Jews and Christians on the one hand, and non-European peoples on the other, was established not by turning to skin color or other biological traits, but rather by addressing cultural and religious differences. Cannibalism, nudity, homosexuality, infanticide, atheism, lack of technology or manners, polygamy, and other cultural characteristics served as prime markers of difference for Jews and Christians alike. It was only later, toward the end of the eighteenth century, that these contingencies were to be gradually replaced by other, more essentialist notions of difference, most notably skin color. Indeed, the central thesis of the present study is that something did change and change radically in the ways in which Ashkenazi Jews understood difference during the early modern period. Throughout the book, I ask two fundamental questions concerning this change. First, I attempt to expose the contours of the change itself, and tackle the ways in which it affected the uses and representations of race in Jewish discourse over the long eighteenth century. Second, I review how these Jewish uses and representations of race correspond with racial discourse in non-Jewish thought during the same period. These questions are answered in four separate chapters of the book, which are organized both chronologically and thematically. My method is to begin each chapter by focusing a narrow lens on one key text, an archetypal test case, and then slowly expanding the view to include other texts. I begin by comparing my key text to a corresponding non-Jewish text or corpus of texts from the same period. This technique satisfies the synchronic aspect of my work, and allows me to arrive at an answer to my question regarding the difference between Jewish and non-Jewish notions of race. I then continue by comparing my key text with later and earlier Jewish and non-Jewish texts that are preoccupied with similar issues. This analysis satisfies the diachronic aspect of the work and directs me toward an answer to the question of change in Jewish notions of difference throughout the period. Operating at the level of the text enables an examination of the racial imagery employed by Jewish authors in all its complexities. It permits us to view these texts in their proper context, to examine their intertextual aspects, the ways in which they engage other texts, both Jewish and non-Jewish, in a multifaceted and often perplexing dialogue. The focus on four different sets of texts should not be read, however, as providing an exhaustive account of Jewish attitudes toward the question of race in the long eighteenth century. Largely excluded from this study are halakhic (Jewish legal) discussions, such as those surrounding questions of conversion, burial, and other such issues. Though I do touch upon some rabbinical texts, such as those written by Jacob Emden or Abraham ben Elijah, the focus of my study is on secular conceptions, and halakhic discourse surrounding race cannot be adequately treated within its confines. For the most part, this work also excludes Sepharadi Jewry, as well as colonial Jews, such as the Jewish community of Jodensavanne. For these Jews, difference was an altogether different matter. The routine encounters with other peoples, the importance of economic considerations, their different status in European society and culture, the different kind of political motives which came into play in their treatment of non-Jews—all these elements make the reality of colonial and Sepharadi Jewry quite different from that of Ashkenazi Jews in Europe, and particularly the maskilim (thinkers of the Jewish Enlightenment), for whom race was a deeply introspective category, and the Other, primarily a conceptual or rhetorical tool. In terms of corpus selection, the four texts or sets of texts selected for this study correspond with four different literary genres: folktales, philosophical literature, scientific writing, and children's books. These four genres represent the most dominant modes of writing about race during the long eighteenth century, and correlate with the changes in racial discourse throughout the period. In the move from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, the image of the savage was relocated from the realm of myth and folklore into the philosophical literature of the Enlightenment, where it assumed a dominant position until the rise of anthropological positivism toward the beginning of the nineteenth century. The increasing emphasis on skin color, skull shape, brain size, and other physiological or pseudo-biological traits made the non-European Other a much less appealing philosophical tool. The savage was thus gradually removed from the philosophical laboratory of the Enlightenment and introduced into the physical laboratory of nineteenth-century hard science. A corresponding literary trend may be found in the relocation of colonial discourse from philosophy books and novels into children's books. The latter phenomenon receives poignant expression in turn-of-the-century maskilic literature (literature of the Haskalah), which, for reasons discussed further below, devoted a great deal of attention to Jewish translations of German travel books for children. Another characteristic of the corpus selected for this study has to do with language.

Although the study engages texts written in Yiddish, German, German written in Hebrew characters, and other languages, the reader will notice that particular prominence is given to texts written in biblical Hebrew. This choice stems in part from the prominence given to biblical Hebrew by writers of the Haskalah. Of course, the importance of the Haskalah movement in the construction and proliferation of new modes of thinking throughout the eighteenth century and beyond grants maskilic thinkers a privileged position in the present study. Another reason for focusing on Hebrew works, and particularly Hebrew translations of non-Jewish works, is the unique intertextual nature of the biblical Hebrew used by the maskilim. Writing in biblical Hebrew opened up a world of associations to contemporaneous readers, which are not always immediately available to us today. Significantly, the use of biblical Hebrew was also a nod to thinkers of the non-Jewish Enlightenment(s), for whom the Bible supplied one of the few positive images of the Jew. Here was language that Christians viewed favorably, a language spoken by a people purportedly not corrupted by rabbinical Judaism/Hebrew on the one hand, or by life in Europe/Yiddish on the other. And yet, at the same time, the choice to write in Hebrew was also a choice to remain within the Jewish world, both in terms of language as well as in terms of readership. By choosing to write in Hebrew rather than in German or other non-Jewish languages, maskilic authors asserted their roles as harbingers of Jewish acculturation, while at the same time pledging their allegiance to Jewish tradition, community, and faith. In a way, writing in Hebrew constituted a choice to retain Jewish difference, but render it a difference of a different kind. Forgoing the hybrid Hebrew-Aramaic of rabbinical Judaism, and the equally hybridized Jewish-German or Yiddish spoken by the vast majority of European Jews, maskilic authors declared a kind of intellectual independence that took its inspiration from the image of "the native," in this case the native Israelites. Indeed, one could perhaps say that for a brief moment in the eighteenth century the subaltern could speak in a language of its own. This language was Hebrew. The first chapter focuses on representations of the savage woman, and particularly the savage mother, through a reading of the memoirs of the German Jewish merchant woman Glikl bas Leib. In her memoirs, written in Yiddish between the years 1691 and 1719, Glikl describes an erotic encounter between a pious Jew and an East Indian woman. Glikl's story is, in fact, part of a tradition of colonial fantasies, such as the story of Pocahontas, or the tale of Inkle and Yarico, which envision the intercultural encounter as an erotic exchange. However, this specific version of the story, with its gruesome infanticidal twist and its incorporation of a highly unorthodox motif of male rape, is intriguing particularly in light of the writer's personal background as a woman, a (bereaved) mother, and a Jew. In my analysis of Glikl's story, I argue that her often radical departures from orthodox European paradigms of cross-cultural contact offer fascinating insights into the ways in which race and gender relate to one another during the early modern period. In addition, throughout the first chapter, I attempt to tackle the assimilation anxieties and inversion fantasies underlying Glikl's story, and to locate them against their Jewish backdrop. Robert Liberles has warned against overreliance on Glikl as an authoritative source on early modern women. And yet, as the only extant autobiographical text by an early modern Ashkenazi woman, and one of the precious few texts by early modern Jewish women in general, the memoirs should not rather cannot be neglected. In the context of Jewish images of race, they afford, when combined with other contemporaneous Jewish and non-Jewish sources, an invaluable view into the ways in which notions of race and gender informed, reinforced, and complicated one another in early modern discourse in general, and in the Jewish and Jewish feminine world in particular. In addition, the folktale, which appears prominently in Glikl's memoirs, turns up in almost identical form in another late seventeenth-century text, a widely read manuscript by the Prague-based couple Beila and Baer Perlhefter. The appearance of the tale in this latter work attests to its positive reception amongst Jewish readers in particular, it would be safe to assume, Jewish women. The second chapter follows the image of the savage from its early folkloristic representations in such texts as Glikl's memoirs to the philosophical literature of the mid-eighteenth century. The key text in this chapter is the Lithuanian physician Yehudah ben Mordecai Ha-levi Horowitz's *Amudey beyt Yehudah*, published in Amsterdam in 1766. A prototypical early maskil, Horowitz has been largely forgotten over the years. Like many of his early maskilic peers, his image was overshadowed by later developments that took place during the nineteenth century. A return to this enigmatic author offers an opportunity to view the eighteenth-century Jewish Enlightenment against the context of other Enlightenments of its time, and not through the lens of nineteenth-century developments within the Jewish world. My reading of Horowitz's book focuses on its paradoxical portrayal of non-Europeans as simultaneously noble and ignoble. Throughout the chapter, I follow this paradox into other eighteenth-century texts such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* or Steele's "Inkle and Yarico," and argue that the two conflicting images of the savage reflect the Janus-faced character of a strand of religious and conservative Enlightenment, which pursued modernization on the one hand, while rejecting radicalism on the other. In addition, throughout the second chapter, I explore the ways in which the maskilim's notions of nature and savagery correspond with their attitudes toward slavery and colonialism, and attempt to tackle some of the questions surrounding the relationship between colonialism, political hegemony, and race. Did Jews, as a persecuted minority within Europe, identify with other subaltern groups? Did they use the image of the colonial Other as a means to deliver a subversive message regarding European hegemony and Christian intolerance? Or did they, on the contrary, utilize the non-European Other as a means to demonstrate a cultural, religious, or perhaps racial proximity between Christians and Jews? Chapters 3 and 4 follow the image of the savage from the philosophical literature of the early Haskalah into the

very first Hebrew books for children, written around the turn of the nineteenth century. The choice to focus on children's literature in these two chapters is reflective of the changes that occurred in the uses of the exotic Other in Jewish (as well as in non-Jewish) thought of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Chapter 3 focuses on the Hannover-born maskil Baruch Lindau's translation of German pedagogue Georg Christian Raff's *Naturgeschichte fr Kinder*, whereas Chapter 4 discusses the early nineteenth-century Hebrew and Yiddish translations of the widely read works of Joachim Heinrich Campe. My reasons for focusing on the issue of race in translation are threefold. First, images of non-European peoples played a significant role in the building of the maskilic corpus of translations. Second, by comparing maskilic translations to their non-Jewish source texts, it is possible to extract and expose some Jewish-specific images and uses of the exotic Other. Finally, turn-of-the-century Jewish translations demonstrate the desire of maskilic Jews to acculturate themselves by conforming to the standards of a hegemonic culture, which was perceived by them as higher. In this sense, Jewish translators may be viewed as agents of an internal cultural-colonization. In my discussion of the turn-of-the-century corpus of Jewish translations, I attempt to identify the relationship between this form of internal colonization and the external colonization depicted in the translated books. The final two chapters demonstrate the ways in which Jewish translators dealt with new, more rigid notions of difference put forth by the writers of the original texts. Written in 1788, Lindau's Hebrew translation demonstrates a kind of reluctant resistance to racism by continuing to employ archaic notions of skin color and ethnicity. It appears that Lindau, like many other Jewish thinkers of his time, was wary of the new intellectual trends of the late eighteenth century, which called for a more deterministic understanding of physical difference between men. I propose that this reluctance to abandon the environmentalist paradigm was inspired by Lindau's understanding of the hazards inherent in the new notions of race for Jews. As the century progressed, however, it became much more difficult to continue upholding archaic notions of skin color and physical difference. Thus, later texts were less preoccupied with destabilizing the new racial discourse, but rather reproduced it in their own, maskilic versions of the colonial fantasy. This cultural shift is discernible in the early nineteenth-century Hebrew children's books, which are the focus of the final chapter of my work. The eighteenth century was a period of radical changes in Europeans' understandings of identity and difference. Well versed in the intellectual trends of their time, Jewish writers began turning their gaze eastward, toward the Orient (both far and near), and westward, to the New World. Often, it was a longing gaze, a reflection upon viable cultural alternatives to contemporaneous European (Jewish) life. Other times it was a subversive gaze, which aimed to challenge European notions of identity and alterity. Still other gazes were inspired by these same notions, and utilized the Others out there as a means to establish Jews as part of the White or "civilized" world. However, whether longing or loathing, subversive or conservative, the European Jewish gaze eastward and westward was almost always also a gaze inward. In their scrutinizing of the non-European Other, Jewish thinkers attempted to delineate the borders of their own racial, cultural, or political identity in many different, often conflicting ways. A few final words of caution; any comparison between cultures runs the risk of simplifying one side of the equation while complicating the other. This is especially true when juxtaposing a subaltern culture with a hegemonic one. In the present study I have attempted to tackle this methodological risk by occasionally drawing the reader's attention to the polyphony not only of Jewish discourse on race, but also to that of non-Jewish discourse. Indeed, it is my hope that by focusing on the nuances and complexities of Jewish racial discourse, new light may also be shed on similar trends within the various non-Jewish discourses. The reader will also note that the study often employs such politically charged and culturally constructed terms as savage, civilized, race, and exotic. For reasons of convenience I have chosen not to surround these terms with scare quotes. Their cultural constructedness, however, lies at the very heart of this study. Conversely, the terms Black and White appear in uppercase throughout the text when signifying social groups, and in lowercase when meant to designate formal color.