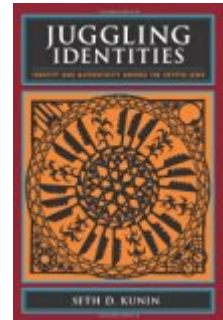




Seth Daniel Kunin. *Juggling Identities: Identity and Authenticity among the Crypto-Jews.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. viii + 278 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-14218-2.



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This book by social anthropologist Seth D. Kunin addresses a scholarly and communal debate that first emerged in the 1990s and is still going strong.[1] No historian denies that in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, tens and thousands of Spanish and Portuguese Jews were forcibly converted to Catholicism and that many, throughout the Iberian-Jewish diaspora, maintained a secret Jewish identity or practices for centuries thereafter. Inquisitorial documents are the chief source for demonstrating cryptic beliefs and practices, and there is abundant independent evidence, including memoirs published by returnees to Judaism, Hebrew prayers dedicated to martyrs burned at the pyre, responsa literature, and scattered references in Jewish communal records. But there is little or very thin evidence that secret Jewish identity or behavior was transmitted uninterrupted beyond the eighteenth century (with the notable exceptions of the endogamous “marranos” of early twentieth-century Belmonte, Portugal and the so-called Chuetas of Majorca). Kunin contends that his ethnographic fieldwork among

self-proclaimed crypto-Jews of New Mexico, carried out from 1995 to 2007, and, to a lesser extent, his assessment of secondary sources, demonstrate that the individuals he interviewed descend from forced Jewish converts to Catholicism and preserve a core Jewish identity dating back to fifteenth-century Spanish ancestors. Today, these individuals belong to the ethnic group known as “Hispanos,” which Kunin defines as “the Hispanic community in New Mexico” (p. 11). Most have not formally embraced Judaism or joined the organized Jewish community, and social cohesion among them is weak (p. 207).

Kunin employed two methodological approaches in his fieldwork: participant observation and unstructured interviews with 110 subjects (59 women and 51 men). Most interviewees (55 percent) were formally affiliated with the Catholic Church, 27 percent identified with Protestant mainstream denominations, and the remainder with Seventh-Day Adventism, Mormonism, messianic congregations, or Judaism (p. 19). Kunin’s multiple interactions with the same subjects allow

him to analyze how self-conception and behavior have changed according to setting and over the course of roughly a decade.

Although he is an ethnographer, Kunin's methodology differs little from that applied by historian Stanley M. Hordes, author of a separate analysis of U.S. Southwest crypto-Jewishness published earlier in the decade (*To the End of the Earth: A History of the Crypto-Jews of New Mexico*, 2005). Kunin and Hordes collaborated together on some of the fieldwork carried out for their respective monographs. Hordes provides the single endorsement appearing on the Columbia University Press press release for Kunin's book (July 20, 2009) and Kunin, in turn, wrote the foreword to Hordes's 2005 book. Kunin's monograph is, in effect, a variation on Hordes's, albeit with a greater focus on interviews and with more developed ethnographic dimensions.

Juggling Identities is a "reactive" study, rather than one that presents an innovative research idea. In the first half of the book, Kunin discusses the handful of articles and books that have dealt with modern-day crypto-Jews and the "authenticity" question since the mid-1990s. Refreshingly, he parts company in one instance with Hordes, who in *To the End of the Earth* presented several ambiguous and subjective symbols on gravestones and other material culture (such as six-petaled flowers and figures from the Hebrew Bible) as indications of crypto-Judaism. Kunin argues instead that these "symbols do not speak for themselves" and as such constitute neither "historical data" nor "evidence" of crypto-Jewish identity, except by "those who chose to use the symbol" (pp. 20; 51). Judith Neulander, a folklorist who, in her unpublished dissertation and several articles, has vociferously dismissed the crypto-Jewish movement as a recently constructed identity, is Kunin's foil throughout the book, especially in chapter 2, "The Case Against the Authenticity of Crypto-Judaism," where twenty pages are devoted to shredding her arguments. To readers unfamiliar with

the crypto-Jewish debate, chapters 2 and 3 ("The Case for...") may seem wearisome, but they are in fact necessary because Kunin shows how the sub-field of U.S. Southwestern crypto-Judaism first emerged and how it developed in both scholarly and lay circles. Still, Kunin's lengthy scrutiny of a handful of brief sources--Michael Carroll's eighteen-page article, for example, receives ten pages of commentary and refutation--makes one wonder if the scholarly debate outsizes the evidence on the ground.

Juggling Identities--as its subtitle indicates--is primarily concerned with the "authenticity" of modern-day crypto-Jewish identity. Kunin uses the term copiously, especially in the first half of the book, but never attempts to define or broadly contextualize it. Nor is there any reference to works that do, such as Miles Orvell's *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (1989). Kunin is working with a limited number of secondary sources and within a narrow conceptual framework, as his five-page bibliography attests. By the second half of the book, it becomes clear that Kunin is using "authenticity" to support two arguments: one historical, the other ethnographic.

Kunin's historical argument for continuity makes up the weakest part of the book. Basing himself primarily on Hordes's aforementioned work, Kunin alternately strongly suggests ("highly plausible") or argues ("compelling historical ... evidence") that modern-day crypto-Jewish practices and identities can be uninterruptedly linked back to early modern *conversos* (p. 81). Kunin cites Renée Levine Melammed's work on early modern Iberian crypto-Jews, but ignores her study of modern-day crypto-Jewish identity, which includes criticism of much of the Southwestern crypto-Jewish methodology, including Kunin's.[2]

Turning to his own fieldwork, Kunin argues that the behavior and self-conception exhibited by crypto-Jews today--however divergent from historical or contemporary understandings--are

indeed crypto-Jewish if the subjects consider them so. For example, many individuals identify their family's spinning top as a dreidel. This is an apparent misattribution, since the spinning top is indigenous to Ashkenazi and Hispanic cultures, but not to Sephardim. However, Kunin argues, this spinning top is crypto-Jewish because crypto-Jews have appropriated and redefined it as a secret-Jewish object. Kunin surmises, without written, material, or oral evidence, that they may have borrowed it from their nineteenth-century Ashkenazic neighbors, who had settled in Albuquerque by the late nineteenth century (p. 174). As theoretical support of his supposition, Kunin explains that crypto-Jews were engaging in *bricolage*, Levi Strauss's concept of unconsciously reusing available cultural elements for a new purpose (p. 147). Kunin also addresses the problem of diachronic inconsistency in testimony. In one example to which he alludes, a woman from a New Mexican family wrote a memoir detailing the ostracism she experienced as a Protestant whose extended family was largely Catholic. But years later, she had reinterpreted her childhood as crypto-Jewish. [3] Kunin explains that such narrative contradictions do not indicate memory invention, but rather a "move from the weak to the strong crypto-Jewish identity" (p. 199). Such fluidity is a manifestation of *jonglerie* (juggling), meaning that any group possesses multiple identities which it deploys in different ways at different times. Kunin's explanations of both *bricolage* and *jonglerie* center on the truism that identity is never static.

These ethnographic insights are suggestive in terms of how researchers should hear and assess testimony. But do they confirm that modern-day crypto-Jewish identity is "authentic," that objects, words, and practices are "smoking guns" (p. 186)? As Kunin himself notes several times, all cultures undergo constant construction and recreation (p. 14), and "[a]ll identities are authentic as well as constructed" (p. 28). Any attempt to demonstrate

that modern-day crypto-Judaism is "authentic" therefore seems tautological.

Kunin's more emphatic point is that "authenticity" also has a historical dimension and that Southwestern crypto-Jews have an uninterrupted link to the distant past. Given the complex ancestry of his informants, this is an ambitious argument. Most of Kunin's interviewees report an awareness of gentile Native- or Euro-American descent. Why does Kunin, any other researcher, or the informants themselves, consider the crypto-Jewish component of this ancestry the only part of their ethno-religious identity that has been both stable and dominant through the generations? In other words, if a particular interviewee claims American Indian, West African, Scottish, and Sephardic descent, how and why did only the Jewish part of this ancestry, however transmuted, survive in each generation and trump all the other ancestries in terms of the individual's current self-definition?

A striking omission--characteristic of the Southwestern crypto-Jewish subfield in general--is any reference to parallel social phenomena. One group of remarkable similarity are the Melungeons of Appalachia, who emerged as a nationwide phenomenon at almost precisely the same moment (the mid-1990s) to claim a corporate identity. Melungeons define themselves as the mysterious descendants of Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans, and identify as a group that has faced oppression from both government authorities and its Euro-American neighbors. Like Southwestern crypto-Jews, Melungeons and academics (these sometime overlap) claim that written evidence of Melungeon historical existence is either sparse or lacking because of racial discrimination and secrecy, and that oral testimony, the bulk of the evidence for historic and present-day Melungeon identity, is just as valid as largely nonexistent traditional sources. Historians, notably David Henige and Chris Everett, have discussed at length the faulty historical and linguistic

methods that inform much of this research and conclude that Melungeon identity has been recently constructed.[4] Like modern-day crypto-Jews, Melungeons claim a stable, core identity that has been uninterrupted through generations of migration and intermarriage with various other groups. Melungeons are not a perfect parallel to the U.S. Southwestern crypto-Jewish phenomenon, but do raise interesting questions for Kunin and other researchers involved in the crypto-Jewish debate. One author has recently claimed crypto-Jewish ancestry as a component of Melungeon identity, the surest sign that the two phenomena may be closely related.[5]

Also suggestive for Kunin's study are Mary C. Waters's findings from the 1990s that American whites could choose to publicly identify with any of their ancestral European ethnic groups (e.g., someone choosing to identify as "Irish," even though all grandparents but one were ethnic Poles), while African Americans were socially constrained to identify as such despite knowledge of non-black ancestry (*Ethnic Options, Choosing Identities in America*, 1990). The Hispanos in Kunin's study, many of whom would self-define or be ascribed as non-white, seem to defy this paradigm by choosing not to identify ascriptively. Kunin's fieldwork offers complex material for understanding ethnic choices in America.

Kunin's chief vulnerability is his acrobatic attempts to present a historical argument: that crypto-Jews have an uninterrupted link to remote Jewish ancestors. His teleological approach (preening all evidence to prove an a priori assumption), the dominance of the optative voice ("may have," "might suggest," "it is possible"), failure to distinguish between possibility and probability (they could be crypto-Jews, but is it likely?), unverifiable material culture and oral sources (the ethics model of the American Anthropological Association he cites clashes with historiographical standards demanding transparency of sources), selection of evidence (Melammed's critiques and inter-

views with Hispanos who deny family members' claims to crypto-Jewish heritage are absent), and focus on anomalies rather than preponderance of evidence, possess many of the features of "invented knowledge." [6] Given that the field of social anthropology is focused on a group's self-understanding rather than historic links, it is unclear why historicity (what Kunin really seems to mean by "authenticity") would be so critical to him. Kunin's diachronic fieldwork and sensitive interpretations of seemingly contradictory or inconsistent testimony are rich enough to stand alone. They bear important implications for the identity construction of a variety of modern-day groups, a construction in which the researcher increasingly participates.

Notes

- [1]. The term "fakelore" as used in the review's title is taken from Richard Mercer Dorson, "Folklore and Fakelore," *American Mercury* 70 (1950): 335-343.
- [2]. Renée Levine Melammed, *A Question of Identity: Iberian Conversos in Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 154-163; 213-216.
- [3]. Barbara Ferry and Debbie Nathan, "Mistaken Identity?: The Case of New Mexico's 'Hidden Jews,'" *The Atlantic Monthly* (December 2000): 85-96; 96; alluded to in Kunin, 199.
- [4]. David Henige, "The Melungeons Become a Race," *Appalachian Journal* 25, no. 3 (spring 1998): 201-213; 270-286; and C. S. Everett, "Melungeon History and Myth," *Appalachian Journal* 26, no. 4 (1999): 358-409.
- [5]. Elizabeth Caldwell Hirschman, *Melungeons: The Last Lost Tribe in America* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), 79ff.
- [6]. Ronald H. Fritze, *Invented Knowledge: False History, Fake Science, and Pseudo-religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), esp. 12-18.

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