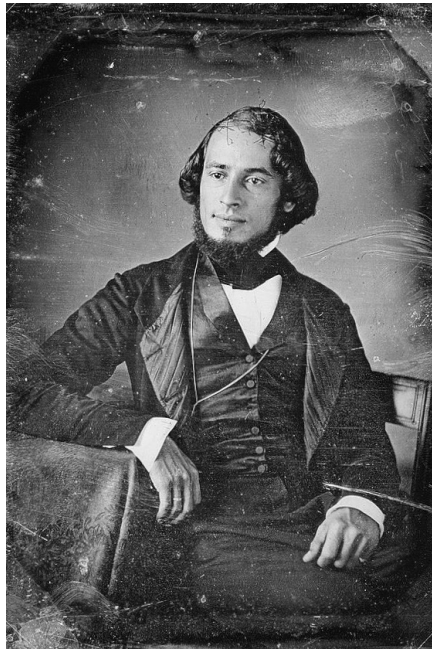


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2019 NEH Summer Seminar
Jewish History in the U.S. South

Teaching Project
Intersectional Racial Productions: Two Case Studies



OVERVIEW:

As we've discussed this semester, one's racial identity as well as one's access to society's privilege structures (including upward mobility) is often more complex than simply boiling it down to biology. We've read two texts, published just twelve years apart: Solomon Nunez Carvalho's travelogue, *Incidentns of Travel and Avdenture in the Far West* (1860) and Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton's novel, *Who Would Have Thought It?* (1872). Both texts provide insights into the ways that marginalized groups positioned themselves within 19th-century U.S. society, and were socially legible according to stratified identity schemas. Both figures were "Iberian" according to available conceptualizations of race in the 19th century: Carvalho of Sephardic Jewish descent (Portuguese) and Ruiz de Burton of Spanish Catholic descent (a former Mexican national).

This assignment asks you to think through these texts and what they show us about how Carvalho and Ruiz de Burton negotiated their positions within U.S. society. As our starting point, let's begin with our class' working definition of whiteness — as a biological fiction with weighty in implications in a society that believes in biological difference and socially stratifies accordingly:

U.S. whiteness indicates a set of social relations that marks one's proximity to power, wealth, mobility, respectability, civic participation, land ownership, labor function, and self-determination. Whiteness conceptually indicates one's national belonging. Race (including whiteness) operates through a visual epistemology.

The Task:

With that working definition in mind, locate sections in both texts that help to answer the following questions, and write short responses to each. The next step in this series of assignments will be a class presentation that explores a couple of these questions. This is in preparation for your final paper that will take one of these issues and explore it in depth.

For now, just start locating textual evidence that help you think through these questions.

- Even as “off white” Iberians — which is still legible as people of respectability and cultivation, worthy of admission into “good” circles of society — Carvalho and Ruiz de Burton might still read as “foreigners” or possibly “exotic” (depending on who they’re surrounded by). Despite their education, manners, and achievements, they’re also religious minorities. How do religion and race overlap? Where do we see their race, religions, and /or national origins start to blur?
- How does vision operate as an epistemology of race and social belonging? What do we presume to know about a person by looking at them? Visual modes of knowing are central in both of these texts, as are the logics of science and its discursive productions of race.
- Both of these narratives involve movement between geographic spaces. How is the perception of one's identity contextually determined? Why might a person be socially admissible in one situation, but viewed suspiciously and marginalized elsewhere?
- What were the social conditions in Charleston that facilitated Carvalho's success? What were the conditions in California that initially protected Ruiz de Burton's status, but ultimately led to her property dispossession?
- We can't freeze these narratives in time. They represent nodes on a trajectory. As such, we have to see them as indicators of social movement. What are the larger U.S. social shifts that influence how both of these narratives play out? What are the “before and after” conditions that bookend these narratives?
- How did later waves of immigration impact the two groups that these figures came from? These groups were not exactly the same as Carvalho and Ruiz de Burton's, but they were similar enough to impact and possibly dislodge some of the protections they had in place.
- Thinking through an even more intersectional lens (we're already looking at the nexus of race, religion, and nationality), how does gender further impact these narratives? How do the figures in these text negotiate their identities according to gendered restrictions and expectations?