Introduction

Religio-Racial Identities

When forty-seven-year-old Alec Brown Bey appeared at his local Philadelphia draft board on April 26, 1942, he submitted to the same brief process as that undergone by an estimated thirteen million other men between the ages of forty-five and sixty-four who had been called in the fourth round of draft registration during the Second World War.[1] On the first part of the form Brown Bey provided information about his date and place of birth, his current residence, his employment status, and a contact person, all of which were straightforward. The second part of the form that required the draft registrar to provide a physical description of the registrant, including height, weight, hair color, eye color, complexion, and race proved more complicated, and Brown Bey struggled to feel accurately represented. Registrars no doubt asked the men sitting before them their exact height and weight, and in this case registrar George Richman reported that Brown Bey was six feet two inches tall and weighed 175 pounds. The form also called for the registrar to indicate the registrant's race by checking the appropriate box from a list of options: White, Negro, Oriental, Indian, or Filipino. The complications arose from Brown Bey's rejection of the government's classification of him as "Negro."

A native of Manning, South Carolina, Brown Bey had joined the millions of southern blacks moving north in the Great Migration of the 1920s and 1930s who, upon arrival, met black immigrants from the Caribbean also looking for expanded economic, political, and social opportunities in the urban North of the United States.[2] While migrants did not generally set out for the North or immigrants travel to the United States with the express purpose of seeking new religious options, they nevertheless encountered, and many contributed to, a diverse urban religious culture. The era saw significant religious transformations within African American Christianity, with the rise in participation in black

Protestant churches in northern cities, the increasing importance among these of Holiness and Pentecostal churches, and the development of the storefront church.[3] The religious changes that immigration and migration spurred were not limited to varieties of African American Christianity, however. In this period and in these urban contexts noticeable numbers of people of African descent began to establish and participate in movements outside of Protestantism, and many turned for spiritual sustenance to theologies that provided new ways of thinking about history, racial identity, ritual and community life, and collective future.

It is almost certain that when Alec Brown Bey arrived in Philadelphia, probably in the late 1930s, his name was simply Alec Brown and that, at that time, he probably would not have minded being included in the category of "Negro," either in daily life or on an official government document such as the draft registration card. But sometime between settling in Philadelphia and appearing before the draft board in 1942, Brown had become a member of the Moorish Science Temple of America (MST). The group had been chartered in Chicago in 1925 by southern migrant Noble Drew Ali, whose followers viewed him as a prophet bringing the message that so-called Negroes were, in actuality, literal descendants of Moroccan Muslims, although born in America. Through his encounter with members of this religious movement, Brown became convinced that he was not a Negro and that to think of and refer to himself as such violated divine command. To signal his acceptance of the truth of the MST's theology and account of black history, Brown took what Drew Ali taught was his "true tribal name" of Bey and followed his prophet's call to return to his original religion of Islam. In accord with his beliefs about his religious and racial identity, he asked draft registrar George Richman to amend the preprinted government form so that he could be represented properly. He was not a Negro, he insisted. Richman acquiesced, crossing out one of the categories printed on the form and writing in "Moorish American."

The sterile two-page registration form offers little sense of the substance of the exchange between Brown Bey and Richman that led to Richman's amendment of government-supplied racial designators. We can never recover the details of this bureaucratic and interpersonal transaction, but the surviving draft registration document reveals the depth of Brown Bey's commitment to this racial identity and hints at

what was certainly a fraught exchange as he tried to persuade Richman to write "Moorish American" on the card. In the end, Brown Bey was successful in having himself represented according to his understanding of divine will. At the same time, Richman inserted his own perspective that ran counter to Brown Bey's and conformed to conventional American racial categories. On the section of the form requiring registrars to affirm the truth of the information presented, Richman indicated that he believed Brown Bey "to be a Negro."

Members of other religious movements that emerged in northern cities in the early twentieth century asserted racial identities at odds with American racial categories, and we see evidence of these commitments in the draft registration process. Barbadian immigrant Joseph Nathaniel Beckles became persuaded through his interactions with members of the Commandment Keepers Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation (CK), led by Wentworth Arthur Matthew, an immigrant from Saint Kitts, that he was not a Negro, but a descendant of one of the lost tribes of Israel that had migrated to Ethiopia. In the course of registering for the draft, Beckles rejected the categories presented to him and convinced the registrar to cross out the check mark she had placed next to Negro and substitute "Ethiopian Hebrew." Georgia migrant Perfect Endurance, a member of the Peace Mission (PM), which was organized around belief in the divinity of the movement's leader, Father Divine, sat before a draft registrar in New York that same April weekend as did Brown Bey and Beckles, and also questioned the government-supplied racial designations. In this case, Perfect Endurance, who had changed his name to reflect his new spiritual state, acted on Divine's preaching that race is the creation of the devil. Because he had set aside his old self and now understood himself in nonracial terms, he asked that the draft registrar indicate his true race, which he considered to be "human."[4] As was the case with Brown Bey and Beckles, Perfect Endurance's declaration not only was aimed at securing racial reclassification, but also explicitly linked religious and racial identity in ways that challenged conventional American racial categories.

This book is a study of the theologies, practices, community formations, and politics of early twentieth-century black religious movements that fostered novel understandings of the history and racial identity of people conventionally categorized as Negro in American society. Each

REGISTRAR'S REPORT

DESCRIPTION OF REGISTRANT

RACE		HEIGHT (Approx.)		WEIGHT (Approx.)		COMPLEXION	
		5 ft 4 in		*196*			
White		**EYES**		**HAIR**		Sallow	
						Light	
Harman ✓ Negro		Blue		Blonde		Ruddy	
		Gray		Red		Dark	
Oriental		Hazel		Brown		Freckled	
		Brown	✔	Black		Light brown	
Indian		Black		Gray	✔	Dark brown	✔
				Bald		Black	
Filipino							

Other obvious physical characteristics that will aid in identification................

....

....

I certify that my answers are true; that the person registered has read or has had read to him his own answers; that I have witnessed his signature or mark and that all of his answers of which I have knowledge are true, except as follows:

....

....

Leopold V. Rothschild
(Signature of registrar)

Registrar for Local Board.......*48*.....*New York*.....*NY*.....
(Number)   (City or county)   (State)

Date of registration ....*April 27, 1942*.......

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Local Board No. 48          23
307 Lenox Avenue            061
New York City               048
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(STAMP OF LOCAL BOARD)

(The stamp of the Local Board having jurisdiction of the registrant shall be placed in the above space)

16—21630—1

Figure I.1. Second page of Perfect Endurance's World War II draft registration card. U.S. World War II Draft Registration Card, Serial Number U548, Local Board 48, New York, N.Y., April 27, 1942. National Archives and Records Administration, National Personnel Records Center, Saint Louis, Missouri.

of the groups I examine offered followers a distinctive interconnected religious and racial identity that rejected the descriptor of Negro and stood outside the Christian churches with which the majority of African Americans had long been affiliated. Members of MST affirmed Moorish American Muslim identity, members of the Nation of Islam (NOI) understood themselves to be Asiatic Muslims, those in Ethiopian Hebrew congregations embraced the history of the biblical Israelites as their own, and Father Divine's followers in the PM rejected racial designations in favor of common humanity. Even as they promoted different configurations of an intertwined religious and racial sense of individual self and shared history, the groups held in common a conviction that only through embrace of a true and divinely ordained identity could people of African descent achieve their collective salvation.

I use the term "religio-racial identity" to capture the commitment of members of these groups to understanding individual and collective identity as constituted in the conjunction of religion and race, and I refer to groups organized around this form of understanding of self and people as religio-racial movements. In some sense, all religious groups in the United States could be characterized as religio-racial ones, given the deeply powerful, if sometimes veiled, ways the American system of racial hierarchy has structured religious beliefs, practices, and institutions for all people in its frame. I employ religio-racial in a more specific sense here, however, to designate a set of early twentieth-century black religious movements whose members believed that understanding black people's true racial history and identity revealed their correct and divinely ordained religious orientation. Islam was created for black people, the NOI's leaders argued, for example, and PM members believed that only those who abandoned the racial categories of the devil and reconceived of themselves as raceless humans were worthy of Father Divine's grace. Thus, these movements not only called on blacks to reject the classification of themselves as Negro, which leaders taught was a false category created for the purposes of enslavement and subjugation, but offered alternative identities for individual members and black people as a whole. This book illuminates the content and contours of those new religio-racial ways of understanding the black self and black history, and focuses on how members of the religio-racial movements enacted the identities they understood to be their reclaimed true ones in daily life.

In rejecting Negro racial identity, leaders and members of these groups did not repudiate blackness or dark skin but, rather, endowed it with meaning derived from histories other than those of enslavement and oppression. That is, they detached the fact of differences in skin color among people from the American racial structure that invested such difference with hierarchical significance and moral meaning. Members of the religio-racial movements undertook the work of resignifying blackness in the context of a hierarchical racial frame that also proved flexible in adjusting to demographic changes that challenged its working categories. Science, religion, law, and custom collaborated to support a racial order in which whites placed people of African descent at the bottom and cast them as incapable of development or progress. This status was permanent and unchangeable, proponents of racial hierarchy insisted, derived from the fact of biological capacity, itself the product of God's design, according to many. Yet race is not fixed. The variety of categories operative in America's racial system at different historical moments as well as the assortment recognized in contexts outside the United States lay bare the constructedness and malleability of race. At the same time, the persistence of racial systems and the oppressive structures through which governments maintain them have guaranteed the social, political, economic, and religious power of race in America. That is, race is at once a culturally constituted interpretation of human difference and a social and individual reality in everyday life with profound material consequences.

Because the primary effect of racial construction has been the production and maintenance of social hierarchy, scholars have tended to emphasize white people's agency in race making, with people of African descent and others classified as not white as solely the objects of construction. In this view, whites maintain the power to create and impose race and restrict access to the most privileged racial category in America, while those not considered white have few means to defy the system unless possessing the physical characteristics that enable passing into whiteness.[5] There is no doubt that the structures through which whites have enforced race, especially state-sanctioned classificatory rubrics regulating people from birth to burial, have helped to confer a sense of fixity and permanence on the American racial system. Indeed, the religio-racial movements emerged and grew alongside an expand-

ing U.S. government at all levels that encoded race into its regulation of immigration, education, housing, and marriage, among other aspects of life.[6] Nevertheless, people of African descent in the United States have often contested racial categories, worked to reshape racial meaning by challenging racial hierarchy, or sought to dismantle race altogether, seeking other bases for collective identity still rooted in shared African descent.

This study highlights the agency of black people as religious subjects in constructing, revising, or rejecting racial categories and thereby producing frameworks for religio-racial identity. Much of the scholarship on groups like the MST, Ethiopian Hebrew congregations, and Father Divine's PM explores their religious authenticity, asking questions about the degree to which they might be considered "really" Muslim, Jewish, or Christian, for example. Recent valuable work examining some of these groups has sought to take seriously the religious strivings of the leaders and members and to do so in a way that makes them legible according to such recognizable theological rubrics.[7] Such scholars argue for a more capacious understanding of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity such that nonnormative versions can be taken as authentic iterations of these traditions. These works usefully reject the impulse in some earlier scholarship to interpret the groups as either "cults" outside the bounds of appropriate religion or primarily political because their religious beliefs and practices did not conform to traditional approaches.

The racial assertions by members of these groups that they are Moorish, Asiatic, Ethiopian Hebrew, or even raceless have not fared as well, with scholars often interpreting such reformulations through religious means as the denial of a true and fixed racial location in favor of an imagined identity.[8] But bracketing their racial claims obscures the fact that, for them, religion and race were inextricably linked. We cannot begin to understand the racial identities of these women and men without exploring their religious sensibilities, and we cannot take full account of how they understood themselves religiously without engaging their racial self-understandings. In contrast to approaches that characterize such claims as fanciful or misguided attempts to escape from a "real" racial identity, this book explores religious means by which people of African descent in the early twentieth-century United States entered into the processes of racial construction and produced their own religio-

racial meaning.[9] This book does not evaluate the authenticity of religious claims or racial narratives of members of these groups, but focuses instead on understanding how they sought to redefine black peoplehood by restoring what they believed was a true collective identity. It is a study of the cultures of religion and race in early twentieth-century black America, using the religio-racial movements as a window into varieties of black identity and exploring the power for members of these movements, their families, and their communities of embracing alternative religio-racial identities.

New World A-Coming

The religio-racial movements were the unique products of the early twentieth-century urban North and flourished in cities like Chicago, Hartford, Newark, New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Toledo, and Trenton, among others.[10] Northern cities were transformed during the Great Migration through the dramatic increases in the number of black residents and by the religious, cultural, and political creativity black migrants generated. No longer bound by the traditions of small community life and often feeling that Protestant churches had failed to address their material needs and spiritual longings, many migrants set aside long-standing ways of thinking about black identity, claiming different histories and imagining new futures. Some of the movements that emerged in this period rejected religion altogether in favor of radical secular political organizing, while others sought to mobilize religion in new ways to effect a reimagined black future.[11] The religio-racial movements were prominent among the new options, and this study focuses on their development from the early 1920s through the late 1940s. All are still in existence today, but with the exception of the NOI's increased prominence in the 1950s and 1960s, the groups were at the height of their popularity during the interwar period, gaining influence in the context of the migration era's cultural and religious transformations. In terms of numbers, which are difficult to determine definitively, membership in the groups ranged from a few thousand in Ethiopian Hebrew congregations to ten thousand or more in the NOI and MST, respectively, and tens of thousands in the PM.

The early twentieth-century migration of southern African Americans to northern cities coincided with a period of immigration of more than a hundred thousand people of African descent from the Caribbean to the United States. Seeking greater economic opportunity in the context of the collapse of the sugar economy, citizens of the British, French, Dutch, Danish, and Spanish Caribbean immigrated to the United States.[12] In 1930, nearly one-quarter of Harlem's residents were black immigrants from the Caribbean, and other such immigrants lived in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Queens, transforming the culture of black New York.[13] While the impact of Caribbean immigration in this period was most apparent in New York City, immigrants settled in other cities in the North, including East Coast destinations like Newark and Philadelphia, and midwestern ones like Detroit and Chicago. Jamaican immigrant and socialist journalist W. A. Domingo referred to his fellow Caribbean immigrant residents of Harlem as "a dusky tribe of destiny seekers" and chronicled the challenges they faced upon arrival, particularly in light of a general ignorance on the part of their new neighbors about the Caribbean.[14] Notwithstanding the challenges black cultural diversity presented, Caribbean immigrants interacted with American-born people of African descent in social, political, and religious arenas in the black neighborhoods of the urban North. In contrast to migrants from the South who were most likely to be affiliated with Baptist, African Methodist, Holiness, or Pentecostal churches, immigrants from the British West Indies, the largest group among the Caribbean-born in the United States in this period, were more often Anglican or Roman Catholic on arrival, although there were also Methodists, Baptists, and Pentecostals among their numbers. Despite the fact that theological differences and divergent worship styles at times separated Caribbean immigrants from African Americans, they too, like their American-born neighbors in the cities, contributed to the religious innovations of the period, sometimes in distinctive ways and sometimes in cooperation with African Americans.

Many in black urban communities with personal commitments to Christianity and investment in black churches as the nexus for political organizing found the increasing religious diversity of the period alarming. Black religious and political leaders as well as black academics examining these developments worried that the theologies, practices,

political attitudes, and social organization of the religio-racial movements undermined the case for African American fitness for full citizenship. Especially concerning was the possibility that the rise of such groups would provide ammunition for whites to portray "black religion" as necessarily irregular religion and essentially emotional and excessive in character. In the influential 1944 ethnographic study *Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults of the Urban North*, Arthur Huff Fauset framed his investigation around questions about the "predisposition of the Negro toward religion and certain forms of religious attitudes," responding, in part, to a perspective that rendered black people compulsively religious and in forms that white scholarly interpreters viewed as primitive. Fauset's study of the MST, the PM, a congregation of black Jews, and a number of Holiness churches led him to reject the notion that there exists any unique Negro "religious temperament."[15] Nevertheless, the specter of the sorts of racialized evaluations of African and African diaspora religious life that had supported enslavement and segregation hung over the response of many blacks to the emergence of the religio-racial movements.

Fauset and many other black commentators at the time offered contextual rather than racialized explanations, emphasizing the role of economics and social marginalization in supporting a varied religious landscape in northern cities in general and fostering the emergence of the religio-racial movements. Journalist Roi Ottley, for example, attributed the striking presence of healers and vendors of spiritual medicines to the terrible health conditions faced by destitute urbanites during the Depression. "These were the conditions," Ottley wrote. "Under the economic stress, hundreds of cultists—fakirs and charlatans of every brand—swept into the Negro communities, set up shop, and began to flourish in a big way."[16] So present were they in the streets, storefronts, and residential buildings in Harlem, Ottley noted, that "the cultists—those jackals of the city jungles—appeared to have the right of way."[17] Economic arguments like those Ottley and others made to account for the rise of the religio-racial movements in the early twentieth-century urban North are appealing, particularly since the emergence of many coincided with economic crisis. Indeed, many of the groups provided material support in times of hardship and addressed race and economics in their religio-racial systems. But neither financial greed on the part

of the founders and leaders nor economic need on the part of members can account primarily for their profound personal and social investments in these movements through which they hoped to transform black communities, racially, religiously, and socially.[18]

The degree to which the rise of the religio-racial movements was the result of and contributed to the declining influence of black churches and their leaders was also of concern to many contemporary scholars, journalists, and religious leaders. Sociologist Ira De Augustine Reid offered sharp criticism of these alternatives to mainstream black Protestantism in a 1926 article in *Opportunity*, the journal of the National Urban League, writing, "The whole group is characterized by the machinations of impostors who do their work in great style. Bishops without a diocese, those who heal with divine inspiration, praying circles that charge for their services, American Negroes turned Jews 'over night,' theological seminaries conducted in the rear of 'railroad' apartments, Black Rev. Wm. Sundays, Ph.D., who have escaped the wrath of many communities, new denominations built upon the fundamental doctrine of race—all these and even more contribute to the prostitution of the church. And there seems to be no end to their growth."[19] Reid worried about the disproportionate appeal of these newer options relative to mainstream black churches, concluding, "While the aggressive minority is pushing forward with intelligent and modern interpretation of a gospel that was once wholly emotionalized, the satellites have glittered with their emotional paroxysms and illusive and illiterate mysticisms. . . . While the one steadily prods at social problems with instruments both spiritual and physical, and methods religious and humanitarian, the others are saying 'Let us prey.' And they do."[20]

Where Reid blamed predatory promoters of new religious groups for what he felt was religious chaos and weakened churches, Fauset looked to black churches and their leaders themselves to understand declining influence in the period, as in a speech he wrote on "Leadership and the Negro." Fauset concluded, "Church leadership among Negroes as among other groups is definitely on the wane. A great many Negroes feel that the preachers themselves have contributed to the repudiation of such leadership by their bigotry, and even more perhaps, by the crass selfishness and the lack of morality of some of them. . . . As for young educated Negroes, they have practically abandoned the church completely."[21] In

Black Gods he recognized the work the urban religious movements did to help migrants and immigrants adapt to the conditions of the northern cities. In this new environment, black churches could no longer assume the allegiance of African Americans, he argued, nor take for granted that they would be the institutions to which urban blacks would turn for political outlet.

At the same time that he took seriously the increasing visibility and importance of the newer movements in urban environments, Fauset was cautious about their long-term significance in black religious life. He figured that the groups had attracted "substantial" numbers and were increasing in size, but reminded his readers that their membership accounted for a small percentage of the religious population of African Americans. "Therefore, it would be as grave an error to discount the significance of the presence of the cults as it would be overestimate their importance," he wrote, preferring to focus on what they revealed more broadly about black culture. For his part, Reid emphasized "the inordinate rise of religious cults and sects" in his analysis of the African American religious landscape, although he eventually came to see their emergence as a response to the particular conditions of urban life in the interwar years as well as to the failures of black Protestant churches to remain relevant. He concluded that "their influence and reach are enormous and significant—perhaps more socially adapted to the sensationalism and other unique characteristics of city life, and the arduousness and bitter realities of race, than the prayerful procrastinations of the church institutions they now supplant."[22]

The fact that many of the movements that emerged in this period rejected Christianity and that some were organized around a charismatic figure with a prophetic message or messianic claim led to the conclusion among contemporary observers and later scholars that "cult" is the most appropriate term to describe them. Some scholars, like Fauset, deployed the term without pejorative intent to indicate a new religious group in the early stages of development. Others, like Reid, labeled movements "cults" in an evaluative move to mark them as illegitimate, privileging mainstream Christianity as the norm against which other theological and institutional formations should be judged.

The label "cult," then, tells us less about a group's theology or members' self-understandings than about the commitments of those who use

the label. Rather than evaluating the religious orthodoxy of any given group, this book explores the cultural and organizational contexts in which people embraced and lived religio-racial identities other than the mainstream of Negro and Christian. I use the term "religio-racial movements" to highlight the common characteristics that unite them for the purposes of this study and focus on Ethiopian Hebrew congregations, the MST, the NOI, and the PM as the central groups promoting alternative religio-racial identities. This approach brings diverse movements into conversation with one another with respect to their approaches to religion and black racial identity, but also recognizes that other analytical rubrics, such as that of the study of new religious movements, might bring different characteristics to the fore or call for a different set of case studies. In short, rather than position the groups under consideration in this volume in relation to a presumed normative center by labeling them "cults" or "sects" or isolate them from broader cultural and religious influences as new religions, I examine them as windows into religious challenges to conventional racial categories and explore what participation in the movements meant for members.

Every Race Should Have a Name

The religio-racial identities these movements supported represented a departure from the more common commitment in black America to Negro and Christian identity, but part of their appeal lay in the fact that they also contributed to long-standing discussions about black history, identity, and the relationship of religion to black collectivity. Members of these groups were not cultural outsiders in insisting that race labels were of great consequence and had broader social and spiritual significance. The terms people of African descent have used to describe themselves collectively have changed over time, from the frequent use of African and Ethiopian in nineteenth-century America to Negro, Colored, and Afro-American in the early twentieth century. Moreover, these "race names" have occasioned vigorous debates within black communities and in relation to the structures of political power about the nature of collective identity.[23] While shifts in naming have not always been part of larger projects to rethink racial categories, the question of what people of African descent in the United States have called themselves and of

how they might compel others to use the same terms has often been connected to broad visions of black history. In this regard, the proposals by members of the MST that people of African descent should refer to themselves as Moorish Americans or those in Father Divine's PM that they should abandon racial language altogether, for example, were part of more general cultural conversations among blacks in America in the early twentieth century.

Discussions of the power of race naming took place in a variety of arenas, and people of African descent expressed diverse views. In the winter of 1932 the *Baltimore Afro-American* launched a contest for its readers to "settle this business once and for all as to the best race designation."[24] Over the course of five weeks, readers sent telegrams to cast votes for their preferred racial descriptor in the hopes that they would win a prize in a random draw. In the end, the paper received more than six thousand votes, and from early on "Negro" and "Colored"— ironically, the two suggestions the newspaper titled *Afro-American* provided on the printed voting coupon—led the competition. Readers expressed passionate opinions on the subject, with "Negro" garnering the majority of votes, although the three prize winners in the random draw advocated "Colored."[25] Some who voted for "Negro" did so in opposition to the term "Colored" and expressed discomfort with the latter's suggestion of racial mixture and applicability to other peoples not of African descent. Affirmative arguments for "Negro," which had only recently begun to be capitalized in the white press as a mark of respect, emphasized the benefits of its definitive racial character as opposed to simply being descriptive of skin color. Most advocates of the label wrote about their sense of the term as fostering racial unity and pride, and many drew connections between that pride and the future fortunes of American Negroes.[26]

Some of those who favored the term "Colored" saw in its implication of racial mixture recognition of the fact of variety among people of African descent and felt the term an appropriate cognate to the umbrella label of "white" for people of European descent. Other supporters rejected "Negro" because they felt it kept them tied to the humiliations of slavery and provided an opportunity for whites to pronounce it in a way that suggested a derogatory slur. Even as the terms "Negro" and "Colored" emerged as readers' clear preferences, some contest partici-

pants proposed alternatives, with many turning to the Bible, drawing on Psalm 68:31, to promote "Ethiopian" as the correct and divinely ordained racial designation, others suggesting terms like "American," "Afro-American," "Ethio-African," "Polynational," "Omnational," and "Black." Members of the MST participated in the contest, casting their votes for "Moorish American," insisting, as did one Philadelphia member, "Take off the slavery name 'Negro' and give us our God-given name, Moorish-American, and let us be men among men."[27]

A random-draw contest might seem a surprising venue for rich discussions of the relationship among racial designators, black collective identity, and civil rights, but readers' entries in the *Afro-American*'s game reveal the degree to which many blacks in the United States felt deeply invested in the power of group naming to produce collective shame or foster pride. Many such discussions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries took place among intellectuals and political leaders, but the *Afro*'s contest shows how vibrant and lively such discussions could be among members of the general public.[28] Many people of African descent in early twentieth-century America cared deeply about the political and social consequences of group naming and understood their corporate future to be tied to the perception of their group. Mrs. Ora E. Brooks of Baltimore captured this sentiment vividly in her endorsement of "Negro" in the *Afro-American*'s contest, explaining that it "distinguishes our race from others. Every race should have a name."[29]

Occasions when members of the public engaged intellectuals on the question of race designations highlight the depths of investment in the political consequences of naming. In 1928, when high school student Roland A. Barton wrote to the NAACP's magazine the *Crisis* to question its use of "Negro" as a global term for people of African descent (a term he characterized as "a white man's word to make us feel inferior"), editor W. E. B. Du Bois counseled the young man, "Do not . . . make the all too common error of mistaking names for things. Names are only conventional signs for identifying things. Things are the reality that counts. If a thing is despised, either because of ignorance or because it is despicable, you will not alter matters by changing its name. If men despise Negroes, they will not despise them less if Negroes are called 'colored' or 'Afro-Americans.'"[30] He further informed Barton that it is not easy

to "change the name of a thing at will" because of the deep associations names acquire. "Negro" has useful meanings attached to it, he argued, and "neither anger nor wailing nor tears can or will change the name until the name-habit changes." For Du Bois and others, the search for a new label was simply a distraction from the more important tasks of political, economic, and social development. Scott Andrews of Warren, Ohio, wrote to the *Negro World*, the periodical of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), asserting this view. He wrote that the debates about "whether we should be called Negroes or colored people" were a waste of time and caused people to lose "sight of the substance in the foolish pursuit of the shadow." Andrews contended that the substance of the work involved "carving out a glorious destiny for the race" and, once accomplished, the resolution of the name question would follow easily.[31]

For members of the MST who entered the *Afro-American*'s contest and those in other groups promoting alternative religio-racial identities to those of Negro and Christian, names were not simply signs for identifying things as Du Bois had insisted nor a distraction from the most pressing issues facing people of African descent. Members of the religio-racial movements who advocated unconventional ways of thinking about black racial identity countered that there are correct names for peoples and that these names have divine origins. They maintained that misnaming black people collectively as well as individually had the dire religious consequences of cutting off access to divine knowledge and thwarting possibilities for a productive collective future. The political and social concerns evident in the exchange between Barton and Du Bois motivated people like Alec Brown Bey to assert alternative identities, but members of religio-racial movements also acted in submission to what they believed was a divinely constituted racial and religious self. They understood the work of restoring their true, God-given identity to involve acceptance of a different narrative of race history.

Leaders and members of religio-racial movements were not alone in presenting religious narratives of black peoplehood, and as with debates about race names, they contributed to broader discussions about religion and black solidarity. Many African American race history narratives linked black collective identity and destiny to biblical narratives like the Exodus story, and the Bible was important in some of the

religio-racial movements.[32] The political philosophy of Jamaican immigrant Marcus Garvey's UNIA also contributed to the intellectual, cultural, and theological currents that fostered the emergence of alternative religio-racial narratives among blacks in early twentieth-century America. Garvey proclaimed that blacks were a transnational, global, and connected people and promoted a black nationalism focused, in part, on reclaiming Africa as a spiritual and political homeland. He labored both rhetorically and materially to achieve this end, calling on people of African descent to learn of their race's glorious history in order to dispel what he called "the inferiority illusion" and work together through the UNIA to create a strong and united Negro world.[33] Garvey's invigorating vision of transnational black pride "opened windows in the minds of Negroes," to use journalist Roi Ottley's phrase.[34] Moreover, the UNIA served as a crossroads where African Americans and black Caribbean immigrants, some of whom founded and joined religio-racial movements, interacted and exchanged ideas about race pride, history, and future possibilities. Although they imagined black collective identity in varied ways, the founders and leaders of the religio-racial movements shared with Garveyites the sense of an urgent need to unify people of African descent, emphasizing connections across space and time.

Popular historians of the period also helped to open up the intellectual space for blacks in the United States to think in unconventional ways about narratives of peoplehood, religious history, and racial identity. Jamaican-born Joel Augustus Rogers, who immigrated to the United States in 1906, was an influential figure in this regard, with books like *From "Superman" to Man*, in which he attacked racial hierarchy and notions of white superiority, and the many editions of the pamphlet *100 Amazing Facts about the Negro, with Complete Proof: A Short Cut to the World History of the Negro*. Rogers also wrote for the black press, most notably a regular column on "Your History" in the *Pittsburgh Courier* in the 1930s.[35] He offered his readers an ambitious global history, highlighting the cultural and political contributions of people of African descent across time while also arguing that the ubiquity of racial intermixing throughout history made it impossible to speak of pure races. Religion was not Rogers's main focus, but he often addressed religious developments in his global histories of race, encouraging readers to situate biblical narratives in a longer historical scope and insisting that,

"our moral heritage . . . derives from a wider human past enormously older than the Hebrews."[36] Rogers's emphatic message that black history predates enslavement in the New World resonated powerfully with the kinds of narratives members of the religio-racial movements embraced.

The religio-racial movements undoubtedly represented something new in early twentieth-century black America: new political and social configurations that resulted from migration and urbanization, new theologies and histories, and new forms of religious organization. At the same time, founders, leaders, and members of these groups participated in broader, long-standing discussions in black communities about religion and racial identity. General interest among blacks in the United States in this period in the relationship between "race names" and civil rights, the prominence of Garvey's race pride movement, and the influence of popular race histories addressing religious themes were all part of the cultural context in which the religio-racial movements emerged. In addition to participating in broader cultural trends of the period, the founders and leaders of these movements emphasized other sorts of continuities, presenting their religio-racial identities as divine truth, often as knowledge available in ancient times and recovered through the person of the leader. They taught their followers that acceptance of their God-given identities renewed connections to their ancestors and true histories and set them apart from those who were ignorant of or rejected the truth.

Apostles of Race

This book explores the individual and social experiences of black people in early twentieth-century America who accepted as divine truth the religio-racial identities put forward by Ethiopian Hebrew congregations, the MST, the NOI, and Father Divine's PM. The study is organized thematically and offers a comparative discussion of the narrative shape and material outcomes of varied visions of black religio-racial identity. The thematic approach highlights questions about how these frameworks functioned as religio-racial systems to configure individual senses of self and orient members in broader social worlds. Part I offers an overview of the narratives of identity the founders and leaders of the movements conveyed to potential adherents, in which they provided

new ways of understanding their origins as a people, the events that led them to their current social, religious, and political locations, and their corporate futures. While each group presented potential members with a unique formulation of religio-racial identity, their success in the crowded religious and cultural arena of urban black America depended on a similar set of components that authorized and supported that identity. I argue that for the thousands of black people who joined them, the appeal of these movements derived from a combination of confidence in the authority of the founder or leader and the power of the leader's narrative of religio-racial identity. In analyzing the narratives I highlight how some groups reoriented believers' sense of peoplehood in relation to particular geographic regions and others by offering a new understanding of the chronology of sacred events for others.

Accepting the religio-racial identity offered by one of these groups as divinely ordained and true involved both a faith commitment and daily enactment of that identity. Part II turns to the varied practices the groups developed to produce and maintain members' religio-racial identities. Contemporary observers often noted, for example, that participants in some of the movements adopted new and exotic dress or changed their names. While commentary at the time was often derisive and characterized these changes as signs of religious and racial fakery, for members of these groups such practices of self-fashioning were powerful means by which they experienced and expressed their new religio-racial identities. Similarly, approaches to diet, health, and healing maintained the restored religio-racial individual and helped connect the individual to his or her new sense of self in an ongoing way. The transformations set in motion by embrace of a new religio-racial identity extended beyond the individual and enjoined believers to build community in ways that derived from that identity. In addition to defining the nature of family relationships, the groups' religio-racial theologies generated community structures and fostered dispositions toward the nation and urban environment that provided important contexts for members' experiences and expressions of their identities. Part III explores these community formations and also examines the impact that interactions among the various groups and with mainstream Protestants had on broader debates in black America about religion and racial identity.

Most studies to date have focused on the life histories of the founders and leaders, with particular attention to the theologies they promoted. Recovering the stories of the rank-and-file members of these groups has proved challenging given the limited textual record, but archival collections of letters, material artifacts, photographs, and newspaper coverage, for example, have contributed to my analysis. The degree to which vital records such as marriage and death certificates and government documents like census sheets, draft registration cards, immigration forms, and the complex corpus of FBI surveillance of some of the groups and their leaders can offer insight into the experiences of members of religio-racial movements surprised me, and working with them has opened up new ways to think about sources for the study of race and religion in the United States. In the course of my research I came to see such bureaucratic paperwork as rich and complex records of religio-racial life. Reading with, through, and against such documents to find evidence of mundane and extraordinary experiences of religio-racial identity illuminates members' work of race making and maintenance and the social contexts in which this work took place. Situating the archives of the bureaucracy as offering central sources for this study also highlights the power of the state to shape and constrain both religious experience and racial identity. In individual transactions and in collective encounters with government agencies, members of religio-racial movements challenged the state's power to categorize them and define black identity. Careful reading of newspapers, vital records, and bureaucratic documents also reveals the strong presence of women as members of the religio-racial movements and, in some cases, in positions of leadership and authority, despite the fact that all of the religio-racial groups I examine were founded by men. Turning from the promulgation of official theology to the lived experiences of members allows us to recognize women's religio-racial commitments and attend to their contributions to religious race making through participation in these groups.

Attention to these unconventional sources for understanding African American religious history makes Alec Brown Bey and many others like him visible as religio-racial actors. Sitting before the draft registrar on that Sunday in April 1942, Brown Bey insisted that he be represented accurately as a Moorish American on the form that committed him to possible military service on behalf of the United States. When asked

to give the name and address of a person who would be able to assist in contacting him, Brown Bey listed Albert Smith Bey, a migrant from North Carolina who lived with his own family just three blocks from Brown Bey and was a leader in the Philadelphia MST.[37] The draft registration card captures the personal and public significance for Brown Bey of the restoration of his Moorish American religio-racial identity and signals his location in a larger institutional and social community of MST members in Philadelphia. Stories like Alec Brown Bey's are at the core of this book's exploration of the desires and experiences of those who joined religio-racial movements in early twentieth-century America.