This is Keeping it 101, a killjoy's introduction to religion podcast. This season our work is made possible in part through a generous grant from the New England Humanities Consortium, and with additional support from the University of Vermont's Humanities Center. We are grateful to live, teach, and record on the ancestral and unseeded lands of the Abenaki, Wabenaki, and Aucocisco peoples.

What's up, nerds? Hi, hello, I'm Megan Goodwin, a scholar of American religions, race, and gender, and barely able to contain my excitement over today's episode (Ilyse wrote that part, I'm not actually containing my excitement at all).

Hi, hello, I'm Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst, a scholar of religion, Islam, race and racialization, and history and I am similarly elated to get into it today.
Megan Goodwin 01:03
We are thrilled because none other than Judith Weisenfeld is here with us to talk all things race, gender, and religion. Let's give her the proper introduction she deserves. Professor Weisenfeld teaches in the department of religion- I believe she's the chair of the department of religion at Princeton University- where she is also the Agate Brown and George L. Collord Professor of Religion. She's Associated Faculty in the department of African American Studies and the program in Gender and Sexuality Studies. Professor Weisenfeld holds national top honors as an elected member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Society of American Historians. In short, she is a brilliant scholar of whom we are not worthy. She's here not only because of her incredible accolades and positions, but because of her mind-blowing vital work which you, dear nerds, have already heard us cite before and use as our storytime in episode 201. So maybe you already know that her work focuses on early 20th century African American religious history, especially how religion relates to constructions of race, black religious life, migration, immigration and urbanization, African American women's religious history, and religion and film and popular culture.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 02:10
We are so thrilled to welcome you to the pod, can we establish though outright? Would you prefer that we call you professor Weisenfeld or Judith?

Judith Weisenfeld 02:21
Thank you so much for inviting me. I'm really excited to be here. And I would much prefer if you call me Judith.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 02:27
Well, you got it! Um, so why don't we dive in? This is meant to be a free-flowing chat. And so I'm going to give us a little, like, segment header but then let's jump in. Keeping it 101 on today: the segment where we do Professor work. Oh, man, the live ton- tongue snap with, like, Judith Weisenfeld on the line? Is just... goofy? I feel goofy.

Megan Goodwin 02:56
I love your commitment to the bit, I respect that.
Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 02:59
You know, I’m not a shticky Jew for nothing.

Judith Weisenfeld 03:03
I’m here for all the bits, you know.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 03:06
Cool, we appreciate it so much. Okay, so I’m gonna- I’m just gonna jump in, Megan, are you good with that?

Megan Goodwin 03:12
I’m great with that.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 03:13
Awesome. So like, obviously, this is a killjoy’s introduction to religion podcast, that’s how we’re pitching ourselves after... oh, I guess 18 or 20 episodes now. So Judith, we want to ask you how you came to religious studies? Why religion?

Judith Weisenfeld 03:33
I came to religious studies in the way lots of- lots of us did, I think, in that I had no idea there was such a thing as religious studies when I went to college. I went to Barnard College. And I really- I didn’t know what I wanted to do. I had had vague plans of going to engineering school, actually, one of my older brothers is an engineer. And I was interested in it, but not, I think, not very good at the physics and all of those kinds of things, uh, that were necessary. But, so I went to- to college for a general liberal arts education to see what- what there was to know and what was interesting and I took some religion courses, that, um, some of which I wasn’t interested in, and some of which did actually excite me. Um, and as- as- I was excited about, um- about the interdisciplinarity of Religious Studies, is kind of what really hooked me in terms of a context in which I could pursue art and politics and history and think about music and- and it became clear to me as I went along, that it was giving me the same kinds of skills that other kinds of liberal arts degrees were in terms of critical writing and reading and thinking about how to evaluate things in the past and the present. And so, um, just as a- as a field, I found it really engaging and I-
it really stuck, for me. I think I decided to major in religion right around the time, uh, the protests for divestment from South Africa were going on, so that was- that was my junior year of college. Two things came together, one that. I was very involved in- in the divestment protests on campus, and starting to see connections between what I was studying and- and what was going on around me. So thinking a lot about how religion informed politics and activism. And I was fortunate at- at that time that a visitor came to the department at Barnard College, Robert Baum, he's now a Professor in Religion and African and African American Studies at Dartmouth College. And he was finishing his degree in history at Yale at the time, and he's a historian of religion in Africa, and he was teaching courses on African religions, some African American religions, I was mostly interested in early Christianity in my studies in the department up until then. And he taught a course called "Religion in Racially Stratified Societies." It was a comparative course of the US and South Africa, on religion. And that was the course that really changed my life, and got me into what I what I study now. But my senior thesis as an undergraduate was on how- how black theology- how James Cohn and black theology movement influenced anti-apartheid work in South Africa.

Megan Goodwin 06:49
Oh, wow.

Judith Weisenfeld 06:50
So it just- it was happenstance that kind of set me on this particular course, and I'm grateful, you know, I'm still friends with Bob. And he's been a great supporter of me all these years. And it just- he just happened to be a visiting Professor.

Megan Goodwin 07:06
I love that. Um, yeah, no, that's great. Oh, what a class! I- I- when I first started thinking about studying religion at the graduate level, like, I- I was a print journalism major back when that was still a thing that people did. And I- I ran out of course credits that I had already paid for by my senior year and decided I was interested in religion. So I like a giant nerd, sat in on seven religious studies classes in my senior year for no credit, just because I thought it was interesting, and then I thought it was going to study Sumerians. So, you know, it's clear- clear trajectory, I've clearly always known what I wanted to do when I grow up.
Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 07:48
I love- I love hearing where religion faculty get their start, because I feel, just like you said, Judith, I feel like all of us find it through these backdoors. And- and it's always tied- it's always tied to a Professor.

Megan Goodwin 08:04
Yeah.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 08:06
Yeah, I just- I'm just in awe of how a little bit of mentoring, a little bit of enthusiasm, um, it just, like, wakes people up and turns them on. And I feel like all these years later, it's still so shocking to me that we have that power in our own classrooms.

Judith Weisenfeld 08:24
Yeah, and if you'll indulge me another short story-

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 08:27
Yeah, please!

Judith Weisenfeld 08:28
...from the Barnard College religion department at the time. The person whose courses got me interested in early Christianity, um, was Holland Hendrix. He was teaching there- he later became the president of Union Theological Seminary.

Megan Goodwin 08:41
Oh!

Judith Weisenfeld 08:42
But what- and what- I think there's a connection to what I do now. I'm really interested in- in- in the origins and the starts of new religions, I think you can see that in- in the most recent book, it's just the question of who gets on board this thing early on, that then
becomes something that has so much power. But he, um- he said to me one day, "You know, as an undergraduate," he said, "you know, you don't have to be a genius to go to graduate school." And I thought, "Oh, no! He doesn't think I'm that smart."

Megan Goodwin 09:21
I couldn't tell if that was- like, were you being- like, was that negging? I don't- I don't know what that means!

Judith Weisenfeld 09:27
He was encouraging me to think about graduate school because I certainly...

Megan Goodwin 09:30
Okay!

Judith Weisenfeld 09:30
...had not thought of it and then- and all these years later, I- he's right. You don't have to be a genius to go to graduate school. You have to care about what you do, you have to be good at it, you have to work hard at it. And that's- that is the thing that I ended up taking away- and I- from it, I- I- I- try every day to be better and smarter at what I do, because I'm not a genius. And- and I care about and I- for the sake of the material I work on I try every day to be smarter and better at it.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 10:05
We said this before on the pod but, you know, as someone who does what- what I do when my reading is- almost, I mean, you know, the hustle of being a tenure track Professor- so n- when your book, "New World A-Coming" came out, I- you know, I was struggling to maintain my languages, and teach all these classes, and write, and do whatever-

Megan Goodwin 10:28
I feel like there was maybe a baby involved there as well.
Or a couple of 'em actually! Uh, there was a space in which, like, reading your work, it's it's a real joy to read. And I'm not just hyping you up. It's a genuine, um- It's a genuine joy to read, because you so clearly care. And you so clearly, um, bring that invigorated eye to it that- I don't know. It's just evident in what you read. And I love reading authors like that, that's the best.

Thank you.

We're actually gonna ask you questions rather than just fan-girl out, I promise. But as- as you know, I'm teaching a Cults class right now. And I have rethought it so that I am reading a bunch of material that's- that's very new to me that, actually, Ahmad Green-Hayes suggested a number of these texts that I'm now kind of reading my way through. But in the last couple of weeks, I've been looking at Zora Neale Hurston talking about Mother Catherine Seals, and we just picked up Black Gods of the Metropolis yesterday. And a thing that I have been so excited to see in these texts is this real richness and humanity in the descriptions of these new religious movements. And I feel like that absolutely echoes in your work in ways that is so exciting, because so much of what- so much of what we read is so dry, and so, just, disembodied. So that's just, hey, thanks. Thanks for that.

Oh, it was in that course, that Religion and Racially Stratified Society course, I read Black Gods of the Metropolis. And I thought- when I applied to graduate school, I wrote in my statement of purpose that this- this was what I was going to work on. And I didn't get around to it until 20 years later, but it's the thing that that really animated me from the start.

That's amazing. Love it. Love it. Okay, gonna ask another question here. So, when we set up the arc of season two, we hoped you’d join us because we see your work, the books, articles, public talks, general Twitter presence, all of it, as so necessary to our own thinking about race and gender and religion. But we're curious to know how you see your own
work. Would you also describe yourself as working at the intersection of race, gender, and religion? Or would you talk about your collective scholarship in a different way?

**Judith Weisenfeld** 13:01

I always thought of- of my- I mean my work is grounded in African American religious history. And I'm interested in- or black religious history in the US more generally, as I've come to think more about, uh, immigration, and should probably do that even more. The- the study of religion and race, more broadly, is something that has become of greater interest over time. My earlier work was on- on race, on African American religion and gender. And so women's religious history, in particular, is part of that. And over time, these questions about how race functions in relation to religion have- these questions have become more central to my work, it's part of it, I don't ever want to reduce (see if I can say this right)- I don't want to reduce African American religious history as I study it to study about how race operates. There are other things to talk about in black religious history than race, racialization, racism, and I don't want to reduce the study of race- race and religion to black religious history. So black people are not the only ones who have race. But I am, as you know, from my work very interested in how race functions in relation to religion, so, and- and increasingly, how gender... not increasingly, but part of that certainly is gender, sexuality. Those are not- those tend not to be at the foreground of my work for reasons that I- I-, are not necessarily good ones. Um, I think I haven't done as well in thinking about this cluster- with- the elements of this with equal force. And so that's something I think about, is kind of working on for improvement. But, so that's the story. So my work is always grounded in my interest in African American religious history and in black religions in the US, and also in how race works. And in my teaching, I teach about race and religion in America. And it's a much broader spread of peoples and ideas about racialization.

**Megan Goodwin** 15:32

Yeah. So two thoughts immediately spring to mind. One- one is a confession. And when is a follow up question. I don't- I don't know if I told you this, but when we were working on the when we're working on the roundtable for the JAAR [Journal of the American Academy of Religion], which we will definitely include in the homework, and have already included in the homework. That was, I think, my first formal publication that wasn't, like, an encyclopedia article where I was specifically talking about race and racialization. And I got so freaked out about both doing that in the JAAR, and doing that with you, and Sylvester and a number of other very smart people, that I fully forgot to talk about gender in- in my article about black Muslim women, until reviewer two came back and said, like, "Hey, what- what if gender mattered?" So, I really..
It was a sad day for Megan. Megan was like, "I have marketed myself as the gender person for my whole career, how did I forget gender" it was a lot of talking you down, that day.

There was a lot of anxiety about it.

Reviewer two! Reviewer two had something positive, something... Absolutely.

Honestly, I have nothing but good things to say about the reviewers from the JAAR that we worked with, they were so constructive. But it was- I bring that up only because I appreciated so much hearing you say that you’re still wrestling with how to give, I think, if not equal, at least the level of attention that these different pieces deserve in the work even if we’re fore-fronting gender or sexuality or race in specific publications. So, it’s the thank you for that. But I’m also wondering, um, where did film come from, then? Because I- I’m really excited to be teaching your work, like, on Birth of a Nation and I would love to hear you think out loud about that.

Oh, Birth of a Nation I can’t quit you. Um, I just love old movies. And I- I spent my childhood watching old Hollywood films with my mother and, um, in many ways struggling with the paradox of profound enjoyment of these. My mother grew up herself watching these in the 1940s in Trinidad and Tobago, so you’re imagining America in
some ways through Hollywood films of that- that era. I'm more partial to films of the 1930s, everything of the 1930s. And so the paradox of enjoying these films that are also often very racist, so I don't- I confess do not enjoy Birth of a Nation, that is not one of them.

Megan Goodwin 18:41

I'm shocked. I'm shocked to hear this.

Judith Weisenfeld 18:44

But- but these Hollywood films that I just- I adore and- you know, thinking about what does it mean to- to see the servants on the margins and- and yet enjoy the main story in a particular way. So I'm just really interested in- I just like these films, and to- and to be honest, and in one, to a certain extent, that project came out of a desire to just like: how can I make work of a thing I spend a lot of time doing? Does this have anything to do with something I could contribute to the study of religion in America? And, right, can I- can I get grants to watch movies and write about them? And so that's one- that's where it came from, but- but- and as I imagined the project, it was- initially it was very different and actually intersected with my growing interest in the study of race and religion in the broadest sense. And the first proposal draft- proposal for the- that this book was much different and was very broadly cast about how about representations of race and religion together and thinking about films like... now I can't even remember what they all are... So, oh The Jazz Singer, for example, is one thing I'm interested in and I teach. So, thinking of that broadly, and as I got into the work a lot- a lot of career things happened, and- and life changed. But as I got into it, I started to see how much there was to say about African American religion in particular. And once I got into the archives, and the production history, and it just all- it took- that- the focus that I ended up taking, and I started to see much more. I- kind of- a project that was much more like other projects I had done that incorporated archives and um... So, that's where it came from. And I spent a lot of years learning history of film in the US, and it was great.

Megan Goodwin 20:58

That was a great answer. And I also- I just I really appreciate hearing, well, just the, like "I genuinely take pleasure in this, how can I help people think more closely about it? And also, like, find ways to enjoy my work?" I think Ilyse and I both, uh, particularly with the podcast are trying to do more of that. We're like, "we enjoy working together, and we enjoy teaching, so how do we make this something we can, I don't know, get grants for?" Thank you New England Humanities Consortium.
Judith Weisenfeld 21:25
And it totally shows, it totally shows. I mean, the other thing, too, is that there are two other goals in that project that drove me. And one— one was that, um, I’m always interested in thinking about what kinds of sources we bring to bear to study African American religious history or black religions in the US, that get us, um, into a broader field than the black Church. So none of my work really focuses on black churches as such. And to— to— so and related to that is to help people think about how ideas about African American religion have shaped the possibilities for civic participation, for example, economic development, educational opportunity for African Americans, right, that ideas, representations, have— can have consequences and power. So the— the— the creation and dissemination of certain images of black religions have sometimes served to undermine black flourishing. And so the Hollywood portion of that book is a lot about that, but to also see how black Christians, in this case, made use of media to do certain kinds of work. And so, it’s part of my interest in thinking in new ways or broader ways or ways that are not as common as others about how— what are we- What are we talking about when we’re talking about the study of black religions in the US?

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 23:11
That gets me thinking, Judith, about this— this next project that, um, I’ve heard you mention, and when we did a deep dive on your website is listed there. But it seems like your— your next project, which I think is tentatively titled “Spiritual Madness: Psychiatry, Race, and African American Religions 1880 to 1940” fits in that— in what you just described as thinking bigger and broader about where we see African American religions, or black religions being thought about, produced, navigated. So I’m wondering— I’m wondering if you could tell us a little bit about it. I’m fascinated by the history of science and I find in my own work, when I think about, um, certainly South Asia and racialization in South Asia, and racialization of Islam, it’s— um, it’s mandatory that I think about the history of science, and scientific racism, and scientific experiments done on South Asians. So I’m, like, excited for this project and I kinda just want to hear you say a little bit more about it. That’s a poorly worded question. But— help me out.

Megan Goodwin 24:22
Yeah, tell about your new project? It sounds exciting. I love that question.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 24:25
Thanks!
Ilyse, you— you said something in an episode recently, I can't remember which one, about— that I really appreciated that— that you were saying no, science is science. It's not— it's not science, whatever it was, with scare quotes.

Megan Goodwin

Scare quotes, yeah.

Talking about eugenics, I can't remember what.

Yeah, yeah.

It's science. And it's science that we may hate, or find racist, or whatever, but it's still science. And I really appreciated that I'm coming to terms with that. So in this, you know, as with that film project, I fell into having to learn a lot about the history of film. And now I am trying to learn the history of psychiatry in order to do a credible job of— with this. I fell in into this, I guess I've fallen to everything in some ways. That's the best way to find projects. I was— I was writing the New World A-Coming, I was reading published psychiatric studies about followers of Father Divine, they were published in the 1930s. And there are several of them with titles like 'Psychosis Among Followers of Father Divine.' And so I was— I was thinking about the general question about, um, the framing of people who follow so called “cult leaders” as mentally ill. And Father Divine himself was tried for lunacy in Georgia, before he moved to New York and became much more well known. And I hope at some point to go and look and see if there are any records from that hearing, there are some newspaper accounts. But I was interested in— in what the response to the followers was. And these studies were there— there are four of them from Bellevue Hospital in New York, and Pilgrim Psych State Hospital, which was at the time, late 30s, early 40s, the largest psychiatric hospital in the world. And— and so they were focused case studies there that— that I wrote about, but there was this frame that opened all of these articles, that sounded very 19th century to me. And with these general statements of like, the, you know, the— I don't know, things like 'the Negro is naturally x y and z, and predisposed to these certain sorts of mental dispositions and their religions are naturally superstitious,'
and I just- as much as I spent all my time, in some ways in the 1930s, and- and there- there was a lot of racism in the 1930s. I was, I don't know, I was really kind of taken aback, but it did sound 19th century to me. So I thought- it just was- I was sitting with it for a long time. And one of my graduate students I was working with Andrew Walker Cornetta was writing a dissertation on history of religion and disability in mid-20th century US with a focus on cognitive disability and- and he just kept saying, "you know, you really should- you should, like, poke at that and see what it is." And I kept saying, "I don't know anything about this." So, but I pulled on that thread and it landed me back in the 1880s, when psychiatry was coming into being as a- as a distinct professional specialty. And so, oh gee, I wonder what these psychiatrists or emergent psychiatrists, asylum doctors, neurologists, had to say about black religion, and they'd had a ton of things, a ton of racist things.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 28:09
I'm not- I'm not that shocked by it, but...

Judith Weisenfeld 28:11
Well, I am mired in racism. So what I came to find is that- that at the end of the 19th century, these, I'm calling them psychiatrists, I'm not- I'm not sure that's the best way to talk about them at that moment, but the people who will- whose work becomes formative for American psychiatry, they're mostly Southern- white Southern asylum doctors, who- so they work in state mental institutions. And they- they- they say in this period, that there's a kind of crisis, there's a public health crisis of an increase in insanity among African Americans, and they are saying that it's because of their unfitness for civilization and freedom. And one of the- it's a kind of dual thing- that one of the predisposing factors for this insanity, as they see this crisis, is a certain what I'm calling the kind of religious mind of the Negro. They construct it, this "superstition," "emotionalism" (all of these can be in scare quotes), "fanaticism" predisposes black people to insanity when they are no longer under, in the white psychiatrists' framing, the protective constraints of slavery. And this is both the predisposing factor and the manifestation--so acts of fanatical manifestations, emotional religion, superstitious ideations. And so I- I'm surveying the psychiatric literature to get the sense of, you know, what are these components? I again- I'm surprised but not, that- that these doctors saw religion, understanding black religion as absolutely central to understanding this. And- and so I've also spent some time in archives, the ones that are accessible some of the state mental hospitals, looking at patient case files to try and get a sense of what the experience of some of the people who are committed to these institutions was like.
Megan Goodwin 30:33
Oof. I-oof. Okay, that's a lot and hard and sounds fascinating and I definitely want to read it. And also my stomach hurts. But I'm also curious, and don't let us go down a rabbit hole about this if it's not worthwhile. But my own work, I've spent a lot with construction of gay and queer identities. And so talking about the emergence of psychiatry does a thing in my brain where it's like, oh, this is when sexual identity becomes like a condition of possibility. And I'm wondering if there's any intersection there with the archives that you're seeing?

Judith Weisenfeld 31:09
So far, my archival research has been in the from about 1880 to maybe 1910. And- and I'm not- I'm not sure what kind of archival access I'll have after that period. But what I haven't.... I mean, one of the things that.... not yet, and one of the things that I expected in getting underway in this work was that this would actually be a book about black women, that that was going to be the history of the people who were more likely to be framed as excessively emotional, or fanatical in their work. And just what so far from the archival...that might be true for the kind of popular culture representation of it, and I think (this is a slight aside), one of the things that I find really striking is when I survey newspaper coverage, for example, magazine coverage, discussions about the nature of black religion in this period and white- and white periodicals, it's really hard to distinguish the- the scientific discourse from the sensationalist, popular culture discourse about what black people are doing religiously. And- and I also am trying really hard to- to make the- the doctors people, and people who are religious, and so they have commitments to mainline Protestant denominations, for the most part. There are people who, many of whom fought in the Confederacy, they are people who come from slaveholding families, and so their scientific worldview is shaped in these religious and social worlds in a way that I haven't found represented in- in what is actually a really exciting new literature on race- race in early psychiatry now. But- but I haven't found- I find that men predominate in commitment to- to the hospitals, and I'm thinking about that they may have, I'm not sure why, they may have been more prone to get swept up. There's a lot of transfer from across carceral spheres here. So from jails, to work houses, to the poorhouse, to the mental hospital, and men may have been more prone, more likely, to be caught up in that kind of net, but I'm not sure yet. So it's not a- it doesn't seem to be the history of black women specifically.

Megan Goodwin 33:53
What is a thing (or you can have things) you'd want our listeners to really learn from you or about race, gender, and religion? What's your 101?
Judith Weisenfeld  34:03
What's my 101? When I wrote New World A-Coming and I came- I had to find a way to talk about the groups I was writing about that had been in the past called sects or cults (most commonly cults). And for the years I was working on the project, I was calling them "these groups in which I am interested," "the groups I'm writing about," and I very, very, very close to the end of the project decided that I was going to call them religio-racial movements or groups. And it really was like the penultimate draft and then I did a whole day of search and replace...

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst  34:50
Oh lord...

Judith Weisenfeld  34:50
...and sent it out to the readers for the final check. And suddenly religio-racial was a thing and I- I- as I wrote about it in the book I think I said something like I- I'm framing it this way, I'm grouping these together through this lens, in a way that's not meant to say this is the only way you can understand these groups and you could re-sort them and ask other kinds of questions and attach them to other kinds of groups as did Arthur Huff Fauset in Black Gods of the Metropolis. But for the purposes of this book, and looking at these groups, this is how I want to think about them. And I didn't think that it would become a broader- the term would become- would be applied in other ways. And I had that one line about well actually, like, in some way, all religion in the United States is religio-racial. And that was the throwaway that opened the door to many things

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst  35:47
Opened the door...

Megan Goodwin  35:47
I'm just giggling.... I'm just giggling because I- the first time I met Judith in person was for this panel that we did at the AAR on New World. And I think three of the four of us who wrote responses or- to your book, quoted that one throwaway line.
...to our abuse.

Judith Weisenfeld 36:08
And I crossed my arms and I said “Actually...” But- but actually, I mean it though. And that’s- that’s a takeaway, that because of the nature, the history of racial formation, the nature of racial hierarchy, the power of racial identities for people in communities, regardless of the- you know, the history of how they came to be formed, that race- race- and race has power and- and in ways that are oppressive in ways that are liberating for people and- and you can’t understand things that are- that exists in a racial frame without attending to that, and attending to how gender inflects, and sexuality, ability, national origin, things like this, and so- so you can’t understand religion, certainly in the US, without understanding race as- as a formative factor in a lot of ways. And- and as you all have done so well, in the- in the podcast that obviously race- racial formation is not the same across time. It’s not the same across place. But it’s always good to think about how race may or may not come into play in different times and places and if not race, what other kinds of social factors are shaping how religions work? So religions are obviously (this is the point of your podcast) they’re not these things that exist complete out there, but they’re located in- in- in places and times and people do them and make them and wield them. And race is one of those factors.

Megan Goodwin 38:10
So if I’m hearing you correctly, one, we have to care about history and location, but two, just- just to be super basic about this: Hey, Judith Weisenfeld, which people have race? How many?

Judith Weisenfeld 38:28
In- in racialized fields, and in societies, all people have race, whether they are aware of it or not.

Megan Goodwin 38:40
So if everybody has race, I feel like everybody who’s studying people should have to care about race.
Judith Weisenfeld  38:46
Yes. Um, yes.

Megan Goodwin  38:50
That's where we're at.

Judith Weisenfeld  38:52
I want to say, so one of the things that- you can be my therapists now.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst  39:00
I'm good at that. That's my role in our marriage here. So...

Megan Goodwin  39:02
True story. True story.

Judith Weisenfeld  39:04
One of the things that worries me- so it's... so Megan, you know, I'm like- I'm holding on tightly to this religio-racial thing. It applies to these people in this time, and so... but- but-but I'm interested I am, I am very interested to see how- how, and- and deeply moved that people find it helpful in other ways. But I'm worried about- about the- I'm worried that it might, for people who study, for example, white evangelicals, is just an example. That to call what they're doing thinking about white evangelicals and religio-racial something, may sometimes actually work to just say, "oh, they're just white people here and so if I name it as white, I don't actually have to interrogate the whiteness and the operations of power of it." So, you know, I see this- it's so weird to me to hear- hear people use this term or I open up a conference program and I see paper titles that have this in it. And I'm like, "What is going on here?" It's so- but I have- I have heard papers where- where it just becomes a way to- to... I'm worried that it's an excuse to not actually interrogate the whiteness, but to just say, "Oh, it's white people. And I've named that. And now I can move on and just study the white people I was studying in the first place."

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst  40:43
Yeah...
Megan Goodwin  40:43
Done, checked! I, um, white people through there. No, I really appreciate the, and we've-
we've done this before and I promise I won't gush too much, but we have said repeatedly
that we really appreciate the specificity that you're- you're bringing to this analysis and to
this analytical tool. And I feel a little bit bad that you're probably going to spend the rest
of your career "Well, actually-ing" people about this- this frame that you have very
carefully pulled together, and they're just kind of slapping on. But I also am excited in my
(what I suspect Ilyse would call theory nonsense way) about the utility of religio-racial
frameworks and identities, if we take seriously the- the imperative to think about
racialization. Obviously, you know, we're talking about Islam and Muslims, but also I think
it could be applied (if folks are thoughtful) to how we come to think we are white. Right?
Well, how I- I, for example, came to think I was white, where did I learn that? And what role
does religion play in that? But also, that was a- that was a big conversation, when we were
pulling the roundtable together was like, how do we keep religio-racial from being like, Oh,
you know, Foucault. Power. Next.

Judith Weisenfeld  42:03
Yeah.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst  42:05
But I also think that- I think that- I think two things one is really cynical, and one is a little
bit more optimistic. And the cynical thing is, is that, like, I'm not sure that we can do
anything about lazy thinkers.

Megan Goodwin  42:20
Hmm.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst  42:21
And so, if lazy thinkers, are going to take your carefully and historically contingent and
specific, um, theoretical frame and not be as careful and as historically specific as they
apply it, then, you know, at some level, as my therapist would say, like, "let it go," like, this
is not a battle we can win because we are not in charge of the lazy thinkers.
Megan Goodwin 42:50
Hmm.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 42:51
And I think- I think Megan knows, because she’s usually- actually I think, at this point, it’s true that you’ve read every single word I’ve ever tried to get published, not just the ones that get published, the ones that have tried and failed to get published. And I think one of the things that bothers Megan so much is that I, like a good historian, can dwell on like, half a sentence of this particular history that people need to know more about. And so, I think, sometimes you’re so mad at the carefulness that I think I’m bringing, but I think that level of commitment is what, like, for someone like me, who wants to import this religio-racial, religio-racial framework, that- that has nothing to do with my time or place, truly. And then if I’m gonna- if I’m going to do that, then my job as a scholar is to be smart about it. And if that takes me, pages, and pages, and pages to explain how and why I feel justified in doing that, well, then- then that's my job. But it’s- I guess it’s Megan’s job to then be like, "Cool. What if we got rid of these six paragraphs."

Megan Goodwin 43:54
Just make them six paragraphs, instead of one paragraph that takes six pages, just saying. But I also want to gently offer, and echo, possibly my favorite tweet of all time,

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 44:08
Megan is obsessed with this tweet.

Megan Goodwin 44:10
I am obsessed with- well it, like, it rewired my brain. And it was also right in the middle of this conversation that I was having with Ilyse who also reads all of my stuff. That I have noticed a reticence among historians to claim theory.

Judith Weisenfeld 44:26
True.
Megan Goodwin 44:27
And I think, careful, meticulous historians, such as yourselves, actually offer really important, if, uh, precise and maybe less universalizing theoretical frames for the study of religion that I wish more people would think about and apply. And so, I just want smart women to take up more space in the academy, the end.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 44:56
Well, and so that's actually, Megan, that's- that's like 80% of what my optimistic point was. Like, my cynical point was: we can't be in charge of lazy thinkers and I'm sorry that lazy thinkers will absolutely abuse your brilliant theory. But I- I think that the optimistic piece for me is, as someone who articulates my own intellectual identity as a historian, I need historians to do careful, meticulous work that has a 'so what,' and I think some history, I think the best history does, and I think some of the worst doesn't. But the 'so what,' for me, can be a place where someone like me can can grasp on and find a foothold and find, um, common vocabulary for the theoretical contribution that I want to make. And so I think- I think giving us that blueprint, I'm curious to see how and where it takes off. And I'm less curious about the lazy- the lazy guys out there. But I- I'm- you know, but at some level, like, you could separate the wheat from the chaff on that. And I'm curious to see where- where those of us who see real identification with your historical methods can say, "Okay, I see where I have a foot in now I see what I need to do. And I don't need to keep fighting Foucault on power, like, why do I need to do that? That's not specific. And it doesn't do much for me, but this, this idea does. So let me run with it." And I think- I think we have yet to see the- the next waves of scholars who can think better about race and religion and definitions, because of the doors that you're opening. And I think that's exciting.

Judith Weisenfeld 46:42
Thank you. And I certainly never imagined myself to be a theorist and I can- I can- I can recreate the- the context for that tweet, can my tweet be in the..?

Megan Goodwin 46:55
Oh, it will absolutely be in the show notes. Yes. I will put that tweet in everything.

Judith Weisenfeld 47:01
That's funny, every time- I keep seeing you retweet that.
Megan Goodwin 47:05
I might make T-shirts. I'm not gonna lie.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 47:06
No, don't do that. We will just- we will embarrass Judith so much.

Megan Goodwin 47:11
Okay. I will keep it on the inside.

Judith Weisenfeld 47:13
But there was a moment where I was like, "Oh, actually, I might be doing theory." It was a- it was a rebel- it was a response to some other things, where- where I was being told that what I was doing was absolutely not theory, not me in specific. But, the kind of work I do. And I've often thought, you know, one of the things, there's nothing I love more than research and the challenge of research, like how to find the people I was looking for in that book was just the most fun I can imagine, the kind of detective work. And so I've always thought, you know, if I have something to contribute, it's about the kind of- my detectively expansive idea of like, 'where do you look for some of this stuff? And what is a source for the study of religion?' Right, is it the census? I know Ilyse thinks so. Is it right, a draft card, or whatever. I was surprised, and then just ran with it. And anything can be a source for the study of religion, but I didn't think about myself as- as theorizing anything in particular, but- but of course, then, you know, I, as someone who has a PhD in religious studies and religion, I- theory never spoke to me, because it was always something out there that, you know, now, 30 years ago, the course I had to take, and two courses, and theories and methods were...they were a slog, and I hated them, and I couldn't see what they had to do, even though, you know, one of them was taught by Al Raboteau.

Megan Goodwin 47:32
Yeah. Oh!

Judith Weisenfeld 48:51
and he said, you know, it's just, it's no good if it's just out there. So you have to tether it to something. And that was very meaningful to me. But I never was quite able, in those days, 30 years ago, to connect the things I was made to read to the things I was studying really
easily. And so- but taking up these questions about race and religion, and really trying to think seriously about what I came to view as religio-racial identity, and I had to think, well, what is their theory of- of how all of this works? And how do- how do I build it from- from there? And so there are- there’s not, I think, in the end, that tweet is the well, it’s not there’s not just THE theory, there are THEORIES, and it depends on where, and who you’re talking about and what it’s for. And so, you know, I just that tweet was like, “oh, wow, maybe I actually do have something to say about theory.”

Megan Goodwin  49:47
You do.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst  49:48
Yeah.

Megan Goodwin  49:48
And- and I love the democratization of theory, in that way. Where like A) obviously, we need to see this from multiple angles and no one angle is going to be exhaustive, but also that the theory comes from the people that you’re studying and working with, like that’s just that- that makes me feel tingly in my scholar soul. I like it a lot. One of the things we cherish about you is how generous you are. You’ve won mentoring awards, your students past and present rave about you, you know (and cheer for) and promote everyone on Twitter. And you spent time with us two clowns, kinda just talking research, and like "ki-but-zing." Did I say that right? Um, and then..

Judith Weisenfeld  50:35
Ki-bit-zing.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst  50:36
Ki-bit-zing.

Megan Goodwin  50:36
Kibitzing..
You’re doing great.

Like, I’m only contact Jewish. But it seems silly to as- or it seems silly to ask why you make time for folks and center mentoring and community, but maybe we’re asking the stakes of that? What’s at stake in being generous and kind in our line of work?

I love that question. Um, I- people have been kind to me, that’s part of it. And especially in the context of some career bumps. And so, I was denied tenure in my first job. And that was at- I mean, the- the- the real sting of it was that it was at my alma mater, Barnard College, but in the Columbia University phase of the tenure process, and there- that- one- one has to think about the possibility of continuing a career. And that was a day- in the days when there were actually potentially other jobs and not- not certainly, but not the kind of professional landscape that people face now. So I recognize that, but- but at that juncture, I had to decide, do I want to try and stay in this and continue to do it, or, I don’t know, go to law school, which had been another option before I decided graduate school, or I just do something else. And so many people came out to support me, in the wake of that. And- and I- I learned that it’s something that had happened to lots of people I knew and had known about it. So the shame of it was reduced by- by that and just the the number of colleagues who came out to say, you know, “what can we do,” and “it’s not you” and- and so- and I got- I did get another job through the efforts of Deborah Dash Moore who’s now at the University of Michigan, who, and several other people rallied around, but Deborah, she didn’t even know me. We had met, wasn’t like we were friends, and she said, “What can I [do]?- but she called me up, she said, “What can I do? Can I try and do something” and so she’s a model for me, where I was fortunate to be her colleague for- for several years at Vassar. And I just, I don’t know, I- I’m not in it for anything, but that. Like to help people, in the end. And to know stuff. Like, I just- I think, I can’t know what I want to know, without other people. And so engaging other people’s work and helping other people develop projects is- is so exciting. And I think, I also- mentoring, I spent more of my career still, then as teaching in small liberal arts colleges, then in a university with graduate students. I hadn’t worked with graduate students for most of my career, although catching up now. And- and I just, it was something that I never felt that I- I never felt like I knew enough to do it. And, but when I think about it, but then I jumped into the opportunity when it came to me and when I think about it as mentoring, it’s easier to imagine that I can do it. So I hate the language of “training” graduate students. So I’m
mentoring people and helping them become who they want to be as scholars. And so then, you know, I don't have to know everything to do that. And I also feel in that totally like Mr. Burns in the Bart's Blood episode [of the Simpsons]. I am so lucky to be infused with some intellectual blood, really great people who are doing great work. So I just love it and I, you know, I um- I want to build field of scholars who work on black religions who support each other and just advance knowledge and show the world that what we study is important.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst  55:12
Yeah.

Megan Goodwin  55:13
Yes to all of that.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst  55:14
All of that.

Megan Goodwin  55:14
Thank you. Ah, my emotions. My emotions!

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst  55:21
Oh, man. Okay, well, I guess- I guess I'm gonna ask you our questions. So as you know, we always end with homework assignments. So I have to-

Megan Goodwin  55:29
Wait, wait! She gets to ask us questions.

Judith Weisenfeld  55:31
Oh! Um...
Megan Goodwin  55:33
Unless you don’t want to.

Judith Weisenfeld  55:37
I’m gonna ask you the, um, well, you answer all these questions all the time. I actually am interested in that- in the questions you sent in advance, the thing that I struggled with most actually was one of my own writing, I would assign like, I don’t like to teach my own work, but I’m interested in maybe a different question or like, what’s the, the piece of work you’ve done that you’re most proud of? Or...

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst  56:10
Yeah.

Judith Weisenfeld  56:11
Excited about?

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst  56:12
I will happily rephrase to that. That’s great.

Judith Weisenfeld  56:17
Well, I mean, that’s the question I’m asking you.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst  56:20
Oh no! Of us?!

Megan Goodwin  56:22
What are you proud of Ilyse?

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst  56:24
I, uh, um... I suppose I’m proud that my book got finished. Like that- that is like- I don’t
know that I'm proud of the writing, but I'm proud that it happened. And, um, you know what, I'll say that I have a, I have an article coming out in the Journal of the American Academy of Religion about job ads, which sounds like a really unlikely and strange thing to study. But I have been keeping, I essentially built a database of job ads in Islamic Studies since 2011. And I did some statistical analysis on it. And it’s a pretty big project and it’ll be out, I think it’s supposed to be out this December. So it’s December 2020. And I’m proud of it because I think it does really good work at all of the things we’ve been talking about, but in this really hands-on practical way. So I’m talking about stereotyping and racializing Islam as ethnically Arab, linguistically, Arabic and regionally tied to the Middle East and using the way that we tell each other what’s profitable, what’s hireable, what’s materially beneficial to know, and to know about, and to teach about, and to research about, about Islam in these job ads. So I’ve made a meal out of these little paragraphs that get written by like, 40 people in a committee with HR approval. But I think- I think- I think for me, too, I struggled in those theory classes of having something to tether my own ideas to. And this feels like the most tethered I have ever been, with some real to do lists for our colleagues, like, if you get the opportunity in this market to write a job ad for Islam, I don’t want to see the word Middle East in it, please! There are other places that Muslims live and colleagues who think about them in brilliant ways that can benefit your department and our students and our world. But like, you got to be willing to see them as valid thinkers. So- so yeah, I think that’s the piece I’m most proud of.

Judith Weisenfeld  58:33
So if I hear what you’re saying, fields within the study of religion have histories and are constructed and don’t exist out there, like, pre-formed entities.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst  58:46
That is exactly right.

Judith Weisenfeld  58:50
Um, I’m auditioning for co-host.

Megan Goodwin  58:53
Love it.
Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 58:53
I love it!

Megan Goodwin 58:54
Anytime you want to come back, anytime.

Judith Weisenfeld 58:56
I seem to recall a heated convo on the wiki about this topic in particular.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 59:03
Yeah.

Megan Goodwin 59:05
Okay, I have to be proud of something. I- Hmm. Well, it feels like my book came out 3 million years ago, but it actually just came out in July. And- and yeah, I am proud that that came out at all. But I think the the piece that I like best about it was realizing, I think similar to you, Judith, realizing that like oh, what you want to talk about here is this religio-racial identity piece. Realizing truly a month before I had to turn in my final manuscript, that the entire book was way more about Catholics and Catholicism than I had realized. Which led to a lot of scrambling on my part, because I am not a Catholic studies person. I’m not a Catholic historian. And yet I kept seeing the ways that America understood not just religion, but sexual morality broadly, as this really curiously Catholic formation, seemed very important but also kind of surprised me, given that I had been writing the book for, I dunno, five years. So seeing that come together and realize, Oh, I am not just talking about folks on the margin, and we can’t only think about marginalized and minoritized religions as separate- as separate from this whole structure of power that minoritized and marginalized them, was terrifying. And it felt like opened me up to a whole new line of criticism on a project that already gets me yelled at on the regular, but I- I feel best about (seems silly, but it’s true)- I feel best about figuring out what my book was about before I had to turn it in. I think I was very close to not realizing what I wanted to say until after I had already settled the other things. So.

Judith Weisenfeld 1:01:00
That’s definitely something to be proud of. And I think, try- finding a way to integrate both
of those into one text is really- that’s a lot of work, so. And I think about my own work as a kind of pendulum back and forth between- between religious communities and their expressions, and then the context of racialization that- that works to constrain them and kind of do one and then the other, one and the other and bringing them together is really hard.

Megan Goodwin  1:01:28
Yeah, it was hard and messy and stressful. But- but- and- and I’m sure, you know, in a year and a half, I will have completely different ways that I’d want to say that but I- I said a thing. And even if I need to nuance it, or completely contradict myself, later I- I did that. So yeah, that feels good. Good therapy, everybody.

Judith Weisenfeld  1:01:49
I know, I have two...I’ll say two things quickly. This is what I was thinking about. So I have this one article about Julie Dash’s Daughters of the Dust, most the film I’ve written about is from the 1930s: early sound film. And- and I- and S. Brent Plate invited me to contribute to that volume on representing religion and World Cinema. And I was- it was a- I was in a- I was just overwhelmed with work and I just couldn’t have find the time to write this thing. And I just, I sat down I thought, Okay, I’m gonna, I’m gonna write this, like, I’m somebody else who likes to write and writes, and so it just kind of flowed out of me. And it was something that had built up over a lot of time because it’s a movie I love a lot. And so I’m- I’m proud of the writing in that, I struggle with- with writing and I try and write better, but that was one of these I did! I actually achieved that I can’t replicate. I was like, I’m gonna write like someone who writes well, and easily, and enjoys writing for these two days, I’m just gonna write this. And so there’s that, and then the other one I like is the recent in the Devotions and Desires, the collection, Gil Frank, Heather White, and Beth Moreton co-edited on Histories of Religion and Sexuality in 20th Century America, and it’s a- it’s a spin off from- from New World A-Coming, it’s about a woman in- in Father Divine’s peace mission. And it was just- I opened a box in an archive and found a story that was just really curious to me, I couldn’t quite make sense of these documents. And so I wrote about them and photographs, several times in different forms. And this article is about celibacy and same sex- raced celibacy and same sex desire and- in Father Divine’s movement, and just as a kind of exercise in- in a certain kind of restraint and discipline in reading those and not deciding what was going on there. So I really sat with them for a long time to do my best to do what I thought was kind of more true to them, then- then the context as I understood it, then to what I- I expected or assumed, because I just- I opened this box that I thought these are love letters between women. Oh good! But then I had to just sit up, step back and say, “Oh, are they, and if so, what does that mean?” So I’m proud of the-
the restraint I showed in the process.

Megan Goodwin  1:04:29
That's- that's, well, and... that's....I think a longing for queer ancestors is really powerful. And I think maybe some of our best work comes out of resisting the urge to decide that we already know what all of this means. So that's that sounds like goals to me.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst  1:04:49
Yeah. Well, so I'm wondering if- if those pieces that we're most proud of seem like great homework for this episode.

Simpsons  1:04:59
Homework? What Homework?

Megan Goodwin  1:05:01
That sounds great to me. I- I'm wondering if there's anything else Judith wants to assign our nerds.

Judith Weisenfeld  1:05:07
I love- I was thinking about this a lot, so I teach a course on race and religion in America and one of the every year favorites of the students and a book I love to teach is Jane Iwamura's Virtual Orientalism. And it's- it's got an interesting material, some of it harder to find over the years, but it kind of multimedia study of how representations of race and religion using Asian religions and Asian and Asian Americans shape how Americans think about, again, both race and religion. And students love the book and I love teaching it and I'm grateful to Jane for writing it.

Megan Goodwin  1:05:53
That sounds fascinating. I don't know this one. This is homework for me. I love it.

Judith Weisenfeld  1:05:57
First chapter on Kung Fu the TV show.
Megan Goodwin  1:06:01
Oooh, I used to watch that with my dad. It’s such a problem. I mean, like my dad’s a problem, but also the show. It’s true. I love him. He knows.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst  1:06:13
Alright. Well, I think that brings us to the end. So thank you so much, Judith, this was a delight and...

Megan Goodwin  1:06:23
It really was.

Judith Weisenfeld  1:06:24
Thank you.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst  1:06:25
You are welcome back anytime you want to come back. I guess this is the part where I say: peace out, nerds.

Megan Goodwin  1:06:33
Do your homework! It’s on the syllabus.

Judith Weisenfeld  1:06:52
The only thing I missed was, um, what’s the segment where you talk about yourself?

Megan Goodwin  1:07:00
[singing] Oh, primary sources.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst  1:07:06
The whole thing is primary source today.
I wouldn't mind if you inserted that in somewhere.

I can do that.

Ilyse laughs the same way every time.

I do! It makes me giggle so much. And Megan does too.

It's so dumb!

It's so silly.

It's stupid!

Well, I've listened to all the episodes.

That makes me smile, that just makes me blush.

I love that. Thank you so much. This was so lovely.
Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 1:07:32

This was so delightful. Thank you for taking the time, especially because we know how busy we know how busy we are, so we can only imagine that that at least applies to everyone else right now. So thank you so much.

Judith Weisenfeld 1:07:43

But the only thing keeping us going is the fun stuff. Right?

Megan Goodwin 1:07:46

Yeah, yeah.

Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 1:07:46

That's how both of us feel actually.