

Botánica Sephardica

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Harold Amateau could fit lots of things into a box neatly and efficiently. According to his daughter, everyone in the family turned to him when they needed help packing.¹ Amateau cultivated this talent as the owner of Caribbean Botanical Garden, a narrow, densely packed botánica, or religious goods store, that he opened in East Harlem at 80 East 115th Street in the 1930s. The tiny shop was stuffed with merchandise: medicinal herbs, candles, amulets, crucifixes, oils, incense, divination cards, statues of saints, and more (see [image 1](#)).

The size and meticulous organization of Caribbean Botanical Garden suited its owner, who was blind; it was also a prudent investment for an immigrant of modest means. But Amateau's store was also stuffed with historical meaning. The botánica existed at the intersection of Eastern Mediterranean and Atlantic traditions and histories, and at the productive juncture of myriad religious, commercial, cultural, and healing practices.

Botánicas tend to be understood as local manifestations of an intricate, transatlantic Black, Caribbean, and Latinx religious, spiritual, and healing worlds.² Their shelves hold the herbal products, sacramental goods, ritual

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¹ Author interview with Micaela Amateau Amato, 19 Sept. 2019.

² Joseph M. Murphy, *Botánicas: Sacred Spaces of Healing and Devotion in Urban America* (Jackson, 2015); Patrick Arthur Polk and Donald Consentino, *Botánica Los Angeles: Latino Popular Religious Art in the City of Angels* (Los Angeles, 2004); Carolyn Long, *Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic, and Commerce* (Knoxville, 2001); Michael Owen Jones et al., "3 Invisible Hospitals: Botánicas in Ethnic Health Care," in Erika Brady, ed., *Healing Logics: Culture and*



IMAGE 1: Harold Amateau in front of Caribbean Botanical Garden, East Harlem, ca. 1930s. Photograph courtesy of Micaela Amato Amateau.

implements, and counseling that allow patrons of Italian, African, and Latin American Indigenous ancestries to practice folk Catholicism, herbalism, Hoodoo (also called “conjure”), Vodou, Santería, Espiritismo, Curanderismo, Òriṣà worship, and other ethnomedical and spiritual systems.³ Yet Amateau himself was an Eastern Mediterranean Jew from the Italian—and, in Amateau’s lifetime, Ottoman—Island of Rhodes (today a part of Greece), and his botánica integrated, in addition to these varied practices, Sephardic and Eastern Mediterranean sources of inspiration. Caribbean Botanical Garden and other such shops run by Amateau and his relatives from the 1930s to the present day, including Nidia Botanical Garden, M. & A. Amateau Inc., and Original Products Botanica—all of New York City—and Rondo’s Luck Shop of Atlanta, introduce an unexpected Jewish and Eastern Mediterranean history to the botánica, and a multifarious spiritual, mercantile, and racial dimension to Jewish history.

Those who study Jews might be taken aback that a young Sephardic émigré would devote his professional life to serving as a healer and supplier to non-Jewish practitioners of alternative spirituality. Yet, my intention is not to frame Amateau’s story as a startling one, nor did Amateau, his clients, or his family view the family businesses as a study in contradictions. Indeed, to uncover the Jewish, Sephardic, and Mediterranean roots of Caribbean Botanical Garden serves to extend and reinforce the logic of botánicas, which “express an

Medicine in Modern Health Belief Systems (Logan, 2001). Long does note that some owners of botánicas are Jewish (2001: 159, 185).

³ These traditions are fluid, regionally variable, and complex, and the scholarship on them is vast. Herbalism is “the supply, knowledge and use of plants incorporating people’s beliefs, knowledge and involvement in past therapeutic practices in the context of health and illness.” Anne Stobart and Susan Francia, “The Fragmentation of Herbal History: The Way Forward,” in Anne Stobart and Susan Francia, eds., *Critical Approaches to the History of Western Herbal Medicine: From Classical Antiquity to the Early Modern Period* (New York, 2014), 9. Folk Catholicism “graft[s] elements of local spirituality, legend, and shamanism onto orthodox Catholic dogma, resulting in a fusion of indigenous and Catholic beliefs that were specific and resonant to a given locality and community.” Virginia Garrard-Burnett, Paul Freston, and Stephen C. Dove, “Introduction to the Cambridge History of Religions in Latin America,” in V. Garrard-Burnett, P. Freston, and S. C. Dove, eds., *Cambridge History of Religions in Latin America* (Cambridge, 2016), 6. Hoodoo is an “indigenous, herbal, healing and supernatural-controlling spiritual folk tradition of the African American in the United States.” Katrina Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin’: The Old African American Hoodoo System* (Urbana, 2013), 6. Vodou is a Haitian religious tradition that blends “several West and Central African spiritual traditions with Roman Catholicism,” by which “healing is effected through group workshop and individual consultations” with Vodou priests.” Michael Largey, *Vodou Nation: Haitian Art Music and Cultural Nationalism* (Chicago, 2006), 3. Santería, one of the most important Afro-Cuban religious practices in Cuba, venerates Yorube Òriṣà (deities), “syncretized with Catholic saints.” Espiritismo entered the Caribbean through the Spanish and French colonial importation of Kardecian Spiritism. Joseph E. Holloway, *Africanisms in American Culture* (Bloomington, 2005), 251–53. Finally, Curanderismo is a healing system practiced across the former colonies of Spain in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as in Mexico and Mexican communities outside Mexico, such as the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. It is “composed of a set of folk medical beliefs, Indigenous and Catholic rituals, and practices that address people’s psychological, spiritual, social, and health needs,” and assumes that its healers work “through the power of God.” Jennifer Koshatka Seman, *Borderlands Curanderos: The Worlds of Santa Teresa Urrea and Don Pedrito Jaramillo* (Austin, 2021), 5.

extraordinary layering of cultural experience.” It also complicates what we know of the complex racial terrain of early to mid-century East Harlem and modern Sephardic history.⁴

Amateau’s story invites three insights, one into the history of the botánica, one into Jewish history, and the third into their intersection. The botánica has for the most part been represented as a product of transatlantic flows, but it also has an Eastern Mediterranean history, rooted in the soil of southeastern Europe and the island of Rhodes. Scholars of botánicas, already invested in the complex cultural and spiritual fusions that take shape within and through these institutions, will likely be amenable to this point, and it finds echo in histories of medicine and botany and the Atlantic world. Yet the specific argument needs a case study, which Amateau provides.⁵

The second insight is that Jews, and not only Sephardic Jews, were prominent pioneering “spiritual merchants” of the United States, even if their cultural and material contribution to botánica history remains to be critically appraised.⁶ Amateau’s history as a spiritual merchant compliments that of other Mediterranean and Middle Eastern (Muslim and Christian) émigré purveyors of spiritual goods like crucifixes and commodities like *beli* [Arab dance] and Oriental rugs, for which they served as “authenticators.”⁷ An exploration of Jews’ movements into the spiritual wares trade builds upon scholarship that traces Jews’ (sometimes outsized) role in certain economic niches, including those like the botánica trade that catered to Black and other minority and immigrant consumers.⁸ Though this case study finds echoes in other case studies, it is distinctive. It offers

⁴ Polk and Consentino, *Botánica Los Angeles*, 15.

⁵ Paula S. De Vos, *Compound Remedies: Galenic Pharmacy from the Ancient Mediterranean to New Spain* (Pittsburgh, 2021); Londa Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, 2009); London Schiebinger and Claudia Swan, eds., *Colonial Botany: Science, Commerce, and Politics in the Early Modern World* (Philadelphia, 2007); Daniela Bleichmar, *Visible Empire: Botanical Expeditions and Visual Culture in the Hispanic Enlightenment* (Chicago, 2012).

⁶ Long, *Spiritual Merchants*.

⁷ Camila Pastor, *The Mexican Mahjar: Transnational Maronites, Jews, and Arabs under French Mandate* (Austin, 2017). See also Julia Philips Cohen, “Oriental by Design: Ottoman Jews, Imperial Style, and the Performance of Heritage,” *American Historical Review* 119, 2 (2014): 364–98; Jacob Norris, “Exporting the Holy Land: Artisans and Merchant Migrants in Ottoman-Era Bethlehem, *Mashriq & Mahajar: Journal of Middle East and North African Studies* 2 (2013): 14–40.

⁸ Saskia Coenen Snyder, “‘As Long as It Sparkles!’ The Diamond Industry in Nineteenth-Century Amsterdam,” *Jewish Social Studies* 22, 2 (2017): 38–73; Mami Davis, *Jews and Booze: Becoming American in the Age of Prohibition* (New York, 2012); Hasia Diner, *Roads Taken: The Great Jewish Migrations to the New World and the Peddlers Who Forged the Way* (New Haven, 2015); Nancy L. Green, *Ready-to-Wear and Ready-to-Work: A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York* (Durham, 1997); David Koffman, *The Jews’ Indian: Colonialism, Pluralism, and Belonging in America* (New Brunswick, 2019); Adam D. Mendelsohn, *The Rag Race: How Jews Sewed Their Way to Success in America and the British Empire* (New York, 2015); Daniel J. Schroeter, *The Merchants of Essaouira: Urban Society and Imperialism in Southwestern Morocco, 1844–1886* (Cambridge, 2009); Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Plumes: Ostrich Feathers, Jews, and a Lost World of Global Commerce* (New Haven, 2010).

the first glimpse of Jews' forgotten place within a fascinating entrepreneurial realm, it magnifies Sephardi stories in a conversation about Jews and commerce in the Americas that has been overwhelmingly Ashkenazi in its orientation, and it complicates a narrative of American ethnic dialogues conditioned by commerce that has privileged the Black-Jewish encounter over all others.

Finally, and relatedly, this article suggests that to explore the forgotten Jewish history of the botánica is to push at the boundaries of Jewish history, offering the field new spiritual, commercial, and racial contours. To explain this point, let us consider a lacerating review of Ilan Stavans' compendium of Latin American Jewish literature, *The Scroll and the Cross: 1,000 Years of Jewish-Hispanic Writing*, written by Amateau's nephew Richard Kostelanetz.⁹ To highlight absences in Stavans' collection, Kostelanetz invokes the world of his New York Sephardic family, whose messy branches included Amateau's botánica, a place which sold "potent herbs appreciated mostly, if not only, by Latinos"; another relative's olive-oil import operation; and yet another family member, a doctor, who catered predominantly to Puerto-Rican patients "because his English was insecure."¹⁰ These figures, so intimate to Kostelanetz's orbit, he calls the "invisible Sephardim" of Stavans' compendium, which skips from medieval Spain to modern Latin America, privileges the writing of Crypto-Jews (though is also inclusive of Ashkenazi writers based in or from Latin America who write in Spanish), and altogether ellipsizes Sephardi and Mizrahi writers. "This Latin-American bias" writes Kostelanetz, "accounts for [Stavans'] failure to connect some critical dots about Jewish-Hispanic relations within the USA, especially in my home town." Kostelanetz's critique brings us back to the third ambition of this article, which is to focus not on Sephardic Jews' invisibility in the history of the Americas (which has been ably explored by others) but on their very visibility in a series of racial and cultural and religious entanglements—particularly Jewish/Black/Latinx/Caribbean—that Caribbean Botanical Garden brings to the fore.¹¹

Harold Amateau's personal and commercial peregrinations invite reflection on Sephardic Jews' historic intimacy with spiritual healing and herbalism in southeastern Europe; émigré Sephardic Jews' uneven dialogue with Black African men and women in Central and Southern Africa, which was informed by the violence and power imbalances wrought by colonialism; and, finally, the

⁹ Ilan Stavans, *The Scroll and the Cross, 1,000 Years of Jewish-Hispanic Writing* (Milton Park, 2002).

¹⁰ Richard Kostelanetz, "Invisible Sephardim," *New English Review* (Aug. 2015), https://www.newenglishreview.org/Richard_Kostelanetz/Invisible_Sephardim/ (last consulted 24 June 2020).

¹¹ Aviva Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America: A Diasporic History* (New York, 2009); Julia Phillips Cohen and Sarah Abrevaya Stein, eds., *Sephardi Lives: A Documentary History 1700–1950* (Stanford, 2016), part V; Devin Naar, "Our White Supremacy Problem," *Jewish Currents* (29 Apr. 2019), [Our White Supremacy Problem \(jewishcurrents.org\)](http://www.jewishcurrents.org).



IMAGE 2: Amato family, Rhodes, ca. 1917. Photograph courtesy of Micaela Amato Amateau.

commercial, spiritual, racial, and cultural interplay furthered by Jewish-owned pharmacies and botánicas in New York City, Baltimore, Atlanta, Memphis, Charleston, Chicago, and Los Angeles and by Jewish spiritual merchants and their Caribbean, Latinx, and Black patrons. To unpack Amateau's tightly packed shop in this fashion, we must first voyage through Sephardic history and to early twentieth-century Rhodes, and Central and Southern Africa, pausing to reflect upon the prevalence of Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews as pharmacists and herbalists in the early to mid-twentieth-century United States, before finally returning to East Harlem, home of Caribbean Botanical Garden.

ISLAND LIVING, I

Harold Amateau was born Aron Amato, the second of nine children, on the largest of the Dodecanese islands, Rhodes (see [image 2](#)). Mountainous and encircled by ocean cliffs, just 18 kilometers south of the Turkish mainland, Rhodes had been under Italian control for but one year when Amato was born in 1913. For the prior four centuries, the island was Ottoman, and its Jews

integrated into the Judeo-Spanish cultural world of Ottoman southeastern Europe.¹² Today, the island is Greek.

Historically, Rhodes' Jewish community was concentrated in the city of Rhodes, on the island's northern tip. When Amato was born this community numbered 4,300 souls, most of them Judeo-Spanish (or Ladino) speakers and Sephardic—which is to say, descendants of the Jews exiled from Iberia in the late fifteenth century. One could tell the history of this community in political, legal, or economic terms, but these frames do not suit Amato's story. To understand his trajectory, and the birth of Caribbean Botanical Garden, one must pin one's sights on the natural and spiritual environment of his home island.

There was a lot of nature close at hand, and this is perhaps the most important point with which to begin. Rhodes during Amato's youth was a fairly small town easily traversable by foot. The family lived in a two-story building made of local stone, with a capacious roof-top courtyard on which the family could gather. A second courtyard marked the entry to the home. In the Sephardic and Rhodesli tradition, these spaces were lined with flowerpots planted with roses, basil, rue, carnations, jasmine, and honeysuckle.¹³

The rural edges of Rhodes were close at hand. Laura Varon (1926–?) remembers strolling from the town's center to a small café on its outskirts on Shabbat afternoons during her adolescence. There, she would lose herself in the café's smells, relish its lush garden, and “gaze for hours” at the magnificent pet peacocks that wandered about.¹⁴ Further outside the town, the island was dense with flora and fauna. One could take a day trip to Villanova (today's Paradeisi), home to the ruins of a castle built when the island was occupied by the Saint John Knights (1310–1522). The Amato family spent leisurely afternoons in outdoor cafes at Villanova, a camera capturing their frivolity. The Mediterranean offered refreshing waters, and swimming, too, was an intimate routine for the clan, as for so many other Jewish and non-Jewish residents of the island (see [image 3](#)).¹⁵

If the Jews of Rhodes lived close to nature, nature also provided them the tools for spiritual practices which fused Sephardic, Ottoman, Mediterranean, and

¹² Amato/Amateau's daughter recalls her father was born in 1909. His obituary and a passenger record indicate that he arrived in New York City on 20 November 1913.

¹³ To some Jews, the introduction of expansive gardens on Rhodes was linked to the Italian occupation of 1912 and the construction of lavish villas by those who gained from the island's political transformation. Nathan Shachar, *The Lost Worlds of Rhodes: Greeks, Italians, Jews and Turks between Tradition and Modernity* (Sussex, 2013): 73–74, 105. On potted plants: Michael Molho, *Traditions & Customs of the Sephardic Jews of Salonica*, Robert Bedford, ed., Alfred A. Zara, trans. (New York, 2006), 233. See also Leon Sciaky, *Farewell to Ottoman Salonica* (Istanbul, 2000): 8–17.

¹⁴ Laura Varon, *The Juderia: A Holocaust Survivor's Tribute to the Jewish Community of Rhodes* (Westport, 1999), 21; Additional materials by and about Varon may be found in University of Washington Libraries Special Collections, Laura Varon Papers, Accession No. 4017-1.

¹⁵ On swimming: “Dr. Irvine Benveniste interview on 14 May 1972, #2, describing home remedies in Rhodes,” www.rhodesjewishmuseum.org/audios/ (last consulted 24 June 2020).



IMAGE 3: Swimming in the Mediterranean Sea, Rhodes; page from Harold Amateau/Aron Amato's photo album. Photograph courtesy of Micaela Amato Amateau.

Dodecanese traditions. Herbalism was common among Jews as well as non-Jews on the island, as throughout the region, and indeed herbalism had been important for centuries in the Ottoman realm. Most drugs dispensed by Ottoman medical practitioners in the early modern era were derived from plants, and Sephardic healing practices adhered to that general rule.¹⁶ And though scientific medicine and synthetic drugs had gained legitimacy both in late Ottoman society and Italy by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, plants continued to be respected for their medicinal properties by healers and those in search of cures.¹⁷ Basil, garlic, marjoram, mint mallow, chamomile, fennel, anise, parsley, cinnamon,

¹⁶ Miri Shefer-Mossensohn, *Ottoman Medicine: Healing and Medical Institutions, 1500–1700* (Albany, 2009), 36.

¹⁷ For the Italian context, see Paolo Frascani, "Between the State and the Market: Physicians in Liberal Italy," in Maria Malatesta, ed., *Society and the Professions in Italy, 1860–1914*, Adrian Belton, trans. (Cambridge, 1995). For the broader context, see Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg, *The Pinocchio Effect: On Making Italians, 1860–1920* (Chicago, 2007). For the late Ottoman: Birsan Bulmus, *Plague, Quarantines and Geopolitics in the Ottoman Empire* (Edinburgh, 2012); A. M. Moulin and Yeşim Işıl Ulman, eds., *Perilous Modernity: History of Medicine in the Ottoman Empire and the Middle East from the 19th Century Onwards* (Istanbul, 2010); Miri Shefer-Mossensohn, *Science among the Ottomans: The Cultural Creation and Exchange of Knowledge* (Austin, 2015); Nükhet Varlık, ed., *Plague and Contagion in the Islamic Mediterranean: New Histories of Disease in Ottoman Society* (York, 2017); Yücel Yanıkdağ, *Healing the Nation: Prisoners of War, Medicine and Nationalism in Turkey, 1914–1939* (Edinburgh, 2013); Sam White, "Rethinking Disease in Ottoman Society," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42 (2010): 549–67.

cloves, coffee, and ruda; early twentieth-century Rhodeslis treasured all of these *melezinas di kaza* (or “medicines of the house” in Ladino) for their curative and magical powers.¹⁸

Plants could not cure on their own. Their application adhered to a spiritual system, and within the Sephardic realm, mastery of this system tended to be the domain of women, especially older women, and also male healers (including rabbis), who were known as *aprecantadores*.¹⁹ These traditions, which had roots in the early modern era, endured into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when they attracted the interest of authors of ethnography, folklore, and memoirs, Rhodesli émigrés disproportionate among them.²⁰ These writers rightly understood that certain Sephardic folkways were becoming endangered at this time, threatened by the centrifugal pulls of emigration, politicization, and acculturation, as well as by the rise of scientific medicine, a field in which Jews were represented. Rebecca Amato Levy was among these chroniclers. In her memoir, Amato Levy recalls the work of her grandmother, La Prima Sara de Bohor Notrica, a noted healer born in Rhodes around 1850. “I remember as a child following her to the homes she was requested to visit, and being fascinated by what I heard and saw. With an air of confidence, she would enter the home of the sick as if she were a doctor. Her carriage was regal. She wore a long gown and robe (*sayo* and *antari*), a small hat (*tokado*) with the brooch in the center of her hat, and a gold belt and necklace.”²¹ La Prima Sara de Bohor Notrica could cure all measure of ailments using *mumia* (a powder used by Muslim and Jewish healers, made from dried skin, including that of ostensible Egyptian mummies or the circumcised foreskin), water, sugar, special foods, and a wide repertoire of chants, rituals, and herbs.

These rituals, and the practice of herbalism, constituted one component of an elaborate system of popular medicine and spirituality that was not limited to

¹⁸ On ruda, see Sarah Abrevaya Stein, “Queen of Herbs,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 112, 1 (Winter 2022): n.p. On coffee as a cure for migraines: Eliezer Papo, “Laws of Coffee and of Not Going to the Coffeehouses on the Sabbath,” from *Sefer Meshek Beti* (Sarajevo, 1872–1874), translated from Ladino by Devi Mays, in Elisheva Carlebach, ed., *Posen Anthology of Jewish Culture and Civilization*, vol. 7 (New Haven, 2020).

¹⁹ Isaac Jack Lévy and Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt, *Ritual Medicinal Lore of Sephardic Women: Sweetening the Spirits, Healing the Sick* (Champaign, 2002), ch. 1; Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt, “Las Buenas Mujeres,” *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* 15, 2 (1993): 107–12; Molho, *Traditions*; Melvin Firestone, “Magical Curing in the Seattle Sephardic Community,” MA thesis, University of Washington, Seattle, 1959; Marc Angel, *Foundation of Sephardic Spirituality: The Inner Life of Jews of the Ottoman Empire* (Woodstock, 2011); Moïse Rahmani, *Rhodes, un pan de notre mémoire* (Paris, 2000), 39–54.

²⁰ In an MA thesis of 1939, Albert Adatto suggested that Rhodesli Jews were “more superstitious than the other Sephardim,” while Lévy and Lévy Zumwalt argue the Jews of Rhodes were considered by Sephardim as the most adept practitioners of popular medicine across the Judeo-Spanish heartland of southeastern Europe. Albert Adatto, *Sephardim and the Seattle Sephardic Community*, MA thesis, University of Washington, Seattle, 1939, 158; Lévy and Lévy Zumwalt, *Ritual Medicinal Lore*, 70–71.

²¹ Rebecca Amato Levy, *I Remember Rhodes* (New York, 1987), 62–73.

Rhodes but typical of the Sephardic Mediterranean. This system blended Talmudic and Kabbalistic teachings, regional and local traditions, and included respect for the power of fortune tellers, magicians, healers, angels, demons, and interpreters of dreams, as well as spells, prayers, amulets, magical remedies, and powerful herbs. These “domains of innovation” existed (in the modern period as in earlier times) in tandem and dialogue with Jewish and non-Jewish religion and scientific medicine, such that the lines demarcating them were blurry.²² In the Sephardic realm as elsewhere, there was endless interaction between organized religion, scientific medicine, popular religion, and folk medicine, with rabbis serving in all these domains as mystics, healers, and creators of *kemeá* (magical amulets).²³ Strikingly, while the lure of herbalism was strong across the Judeo-Spanish cultural zone of southeastern Europe and Anatolia, Rhodes was revered as the place where Sephardic “home medicine” reached its apex.²⁴

The Amato children—girls as well as boys—were educated in the local schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU), which were among hundreds of such schools established through the Mediterranean and Middle East by the Franco-Jewish philanthropy of the same name. The AIU aimed to “uplift” Middle Eastern Jewish girls and boys with the tools of a secular, French education and a thorough training in French. (By the time of Amato’s adolescence, Rhodes’ Jews had Italianized, too, and most of his generation became fluent in Italian.) An AIU education instilled in many Sephardic youth a sense—partly polemical, partly canny—that opportunity was linked to being connected beyond one’s community, whether through emigration or a connection to French culture or society.

Indeed, by the 1920s the Amatos were feeling the global economic downturn locally, with the small size of their island ever more constrictive of

²² On the intersection of scientific medicine and traditional healing: Stacey Langwick, *Bodies, Politics, and African Healing: The Matter of Maladies in Tanzania* (Bloomington, 2011); Karen E. Flint, *Healing Traditions: African Medicine, Cultural Exchange, and Competition in South Africa, 1820–1948* (Columbus, 2008).

²³ Lauren Derby, “Imperial Idols: French and United States Revenants in Haitian Vodou,” *History of Religions* 54, 4 (2015): 394–422, 397. On *kemeá*: Molho, *Traditions*, 75, 272–23. The literature on Jewish esoteric knowledge and magic is vast, but neglects the Sephardic world, excepting Shalom Sabar, “Amulets,” in Norman A. Stillman, ed., *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, vol. 1 (Leiden, 2010), 202–6. On Jewish magic and the ancient world: Ra’anana Boustán and Joseph E. Sanzo, “Christian Magicians, Jewish Magic, and the Shared Magical Culture of Late Antiquity,” *Harvard Theological Review* 110, 2 (2017): 217–40; Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge, 2008); Peter Schäfer, “Magic and Religion in Ancient Judaism,” in Peter Schäfer and Hans Kippenberg, eds., *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium* (Leiden, 1997); Yuval Harari, “What Is a Magical Text? Methodological Reflections Aimed at Redefining Early Jewish Magic,” in S. Shaked, ed., *Officina Magica: Essays on the Practice of Magic in Antiquity* (Leiden, 2005), 91–124; Ortal-Paz Saar, *Jewish Love Magic: From Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2017). For the broader, modern frame: Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, & Science in the Modern World* (Oxford, 2004).

²⁴ Levy and Zumwalt Levy, *Ritual Medicinal Lore*.

financial opportunities for the young.²⁵ Like so many families on Rhodes, the Amato children began to emigrate in various directions—to France, the United States, Egypt, the Belgian Congo, British-controlled Southern Rhodesia, and beyond. Aron Amato's turn came in 1928 when, at the age of fifteen, he followed his eldest sister Rebecca to Central Africa, a destination that had absorbed a steady stream of young Jewish, Rhodesli men and women since the early years of the century. Amato had recently graduated from the AIU lycée, and his departure was marked in a flurry of photographs taken, one speculates, with a new camera purchased for the occasion.

A COLONIAL SOJOURN

Amato's sister Rebecca (née Amato) Piha had made her way to Southern Africa via Egypt, where she married. Once in the region, she lived among an émigré community of Rhodesli Jews who established themselves in Southern and Central Africa. In the Belgian Congo (later Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), these Jews settled in towns along the Port Francqui-Elizabethville (now Ilebo-Lubumbashi) rail line, including Luluabourg (now Kananga), Kamina, Luputa, Matadi, and in the cities of Elizabethville and Leopoldville (now Kinshasa). Other Rhodesli Jewish émigrés settled in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in small settlements such as Que Que, Gatooma, Selukwe, and especially Salisbury (now Harare).²⁶

Members of this community occupied a complex place within the colonial racial and economic hierarchy. On one hand, they joined a class of white settler colonialists whose skin color, class, and legal status gave them extraordinary and unfair advantage within the colonial system they helped impose over local, Black

²⁵ Andrew Arsan, John Karam, and Akram Khater, "On Forgotten Shores: Migration in Middle East Studies, and the Middle East in Migration Studies," *Mashriq & Mahajar: Journal of Middle East and North African Studies* 1, 1 (2013): 1–7; Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews*; Isa Blumi, *Ottoman Refugees 1878–1939: Migration in a Post-Imperial World* (London, 2013); Kemal H. Karpat, "Jewish Population Movements in the Ottoman Empire, 1862–1914," in Avigdor Levy, ed., *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, 1994), 399–421; Kemal H. Karpat, "The Ottoman Emigration to America, 1860–1914," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 17 (May 1985): 175–209; Basil Gounaris, "Emigration from Macedonia in the Early Twentieth Century," *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 7 (May 1989): 133–53.

²⁶ Moïse Rahmani, *Shalom Bwana: La saga des Juifs du Congo* (Paris, 2002); and *Juifs du Congo: la confiance et l'espoir* (Paris, 2007); Renee Hirschorn, "Jews from Rhodes in Central and Southern Africa," in Melvin Ember, Carol R. Ember, and Ian Skoggard, eds., *Encyclopedia of Diaspora: Immigrant and Refugee Cultures around the World* (New York, 2005), 925–34; Jacqueline Benatar and Myriam Pimienta-Benatar, *De Rhodes à Elisabethville: l'Odyssée d'une communauté Sépharade* (Paris, 2000); Yitzchak Kerem, "The Settlement of Rhodian and other Sephardic Jews in Montgomery and Atlanta in the Twentieth Century," *American Jewish History*, 85, 4 (1997): 373–91; Barry Alexander Kosmin, *Majuta: A History of the Jews of Rhodesia* (Gwelo, Zimbabwe, 1981); Maurice Wagner, "Rhodesia," *American Jewish Year Book* 78 (1978): 508–16.

African women, men, and families.²⁷ This is immediately apparent in photographs Amato took of and with his family. The extended family, immaculately dressed in the European vogue (meticulously cleaned, starched, ironed, and blindingly white), are represented vacationing in their Buick touring car and luxuriating over meals in homes equipped with imported furniture and household objects such as decorative lace, elaborate glassware, and a piano. Occasionally Black African men, women, and children who appear to be domestic workers, drivers, and shop assistants are featured, as in one photograph Amato took of two of his nephews, pinning to it an infelicitous caption identifying “Simon, Isaac, and their Blacks [*Simon, Isaac, et ses nègres*].”²⁸

Yet Amato, like other young Rhodesli Jews who moved to Central and Southern Africa, did not (and was not entirely allowed) to emulate white, non-Jewish Europeans in his professional choices, for certain doors were closed even to the Jewish colonial elite.²⁹ Without access to the professions or colonial bureaucracy, many young Sephardim in these regions staffed or opened trading shops situated along rail lines and near mines that catered to a Black African buying public. Lebanese merchants occupied the same niche, and were the main competitors of Sephardic shop owners in the region.³⁰ Amato helped run his brother-in-law’s store and bakery in Gatoona and seems to have had something to do with a family-run store in Norton and another near the Turkois gold mines. He subsequently opened a store of his own in Jenkinstown, a location in southern Rhodesia which acquired a postal address in 1923 (see *images 4a* and *4b*).³¹ These shops tended to be simple, one-story, brick, and without signage, with an outhouse behind and a small temporary bedroom for their owner next door.

²⁷ On the privileged racial and economic position some Jews held within colonial contexts: Ruth Cernea, *Almost Englishmen: Baghdadi Jews in British Burma* (Lanham, 2006); David Feldman, “Jews and the British Empire c. 1900,” *History Workshop Journal* 63, 1 (2007): 70–89; Elizabeth E. Imber, “A Late Imperial Elite Jewish Politics: Baghdadi Jews in British India and the Political Horizons of Empire and Nation,” *Jewish Social Studies* 23, 2 (2018): 48–85; Joan Roland, *The Jewish Communities of India: Identity in a Colonial Era* (New Brunswick, 1998); Stein, *Plumes*; Sarah Abrevaya Stein, “Protected Persons? The Baghdadi Jewish Diaspora, the British State, and the Persistence of Empire,” *American Historical Review* 116, 1 (2011): 80–108.

²⁸ Devi Mays analyzes a turn-of-the-century photograph of an Ottoman Jewish émigré couple in Mexico who “deliberately assembled the indigenous Mexican individuals next to them and posed in front of a hut with a palm-front roof” as a means of asserting their whiteness. *Forging Ties, Forging Passports: Migration and the Modern Sephardi Diaspora* (Stanford, 2020), 22.

²⁹ Sarah Abrevaya Stein, “‘Falling into Feathers’: Jews and the Trans-Atlantic Ostrich Feather Trade,” *Journal of Modern History* 79, 4 (2007): 772–812.

³⁰ On the Lebanese mercantile diaspora in Africa: Andrew Arsan, *Interlopers of Empire: The Lebanese Diaspora in Colonial French West Africa* (Oxford, 2014); Mara Leichtman, *Shi’i Cosmopolitanisms in Africa: Lebanese Migration and Religious Conversion in Senegal* (Bloomington, 2015); Chris Bierwirth, “The Initial Establishment of the Lebanese Community in Côte d’Ivoire, ca. 1925–1945,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 30, 2 (1997): 325–48. Lily Pearl Balloffet has described a similar historical dynamic unfolding in Argentina, in *Argentina in the Global Middle East* (Stanford, 2020).

³¹ “British Commonwealth Postmarks, Rhodes, Northern & Southern,” <http://pbbooks.com/cr43.htm> (last consulted 24 June 2020).



IMAGE 4A: Aron Amato's shop in Jenkinstown, Southern Rhodesia, ca. 1928, with unidentified man. Photograph courtesy of Micaela Amato Amateau.



IMAGE 4B: Family-owned store in Norton (Chivero), Southern Rhodesia, ca. 1928. Photograph courtesy of Micaela Amato Amateau.

The commercial relationship fostered by these shops did not alter the racial status of Amato or Rhodesli Jews writ large. Undoubtedly, Rhodesli Jews in Central and Southern Africa reaped the distressing advantages of settler colonialism. And yet, running a shop that catered to Black customers also rendered diasporic merchants like Amato intermediaries in the colonial marketplace—what Andrew Arsen has called (in reference to the Lebanese mercantile community) “interlopers of empire.”³² Certainly it placed them in closer proximity to Black African men and women than was experienced by many white Europeans, notwithstanding the fact that this proximity was contingent on the colonial marketplace.³³ Amato’s daughter remembers that when her father eventually left southern Africa, first for Turkey and then the United States, his knowledge of “Swahili” stayed with him. Whether Amato in fact communicated with his patrons in pigeon Swahili or Kituba or Lingala (in the Belgian Congo) or in Chewa, Chibarwe, Kalanga, Koisan, or any of the many other languages spoken in Rhodesia, the point is that he does appear to have had a linguistic and commercial relationship with the Black African women and men who patronized his store.

These relationships bore themselves out on the shop floor. Like any budding, entrepreneurial merchant, Amato stocked his store with merchandise he knew his consumers would buy: fabric, zippers, buttons, suits and hats; cooking pots, canned goods, biscuits, and grains; small suitcases and tires; cooking and motor oil. Did this stock include spiritual, herbal, or medicinal wares such as Amato would come to peddle in New York City, or even objects like *minkisi* [fetishes], which might have appealed to clients in or from the KiKongo cultural area?³⁴ While we do not know the answer, we can conclude that Amato’s experience in Central and Southern Africa lent him transferrable skills as a merchant and cross-cultural broker.³⁵ He would subsequently transfer these skills, and possibly knowledge of spiritual wares as well, to East Harlem. With him voyaged the mystique of having lived and worked in Africa, birthplace of religious and healing practices revered by many of his future African American, Caribbean, and Latinx patrons.

ISLAND LIVING, II

Aron Amato made his way to New York City under the newly adopted name Harold Amateau (by which I will refer to him from this point onwards) in 1933

³² Arsen, *Interlopers*.

³³ Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Luxe Women, Commodification, Consumption, and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* (Durham, 1996), ch. 3.

³⁴ On the Minkisi and KiKongo cultures: Wyatt MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture: The Conceptual Challenge of the Particular* (Bloomington, 2000), ch. 5.

³⁵ Sebouh Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of the Armenian Merchants from New Julfa* (Berkeley, 2011); Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in The Early Modern Period* (New Haven, 2009).

after spending roughly eight months recovering from malaria with family in Istanbul. This trajectory allowed Amateau to join a substantial wave of Sephardic migration to North America.³⁶ New York was a logical choice from a familial standpoint, for by now all of Amateau's siblings—save for Rebecca, the sister he left behind in Salisbury—were living in the city, as were Amateau's parents.

Amateau joined his extended family in Queens. Had the family wished to join a dense Ottoman Jewish émigré community, Harlem or the Lower East Side would have been a more obvious choice. When the initial members of the Amateau family moved to New York City sometime in the first two decades of the century, the Sephardic *kolonia* [colony] of Harlem, then concentrated between 110th and 125th and Park and Lenox Avenues, was home to upwards of twenty thousand Sephardic Jews, roughly half of the city's Sephardic population.³⁷ At least some of these Jews chose Harlem as a place of business or their neighborhood of choice because, being native speakers of Judeo-Spanish, they felt at ease with Spanish-speaking neighbors. This is one reason that Harlem was by 1925 as much of a magnet for the city's Sephardim as was the immigrant-dense Lower East Side.³⁸ Caribbean Botanical Garden would open squarely in the midst of the *kolonia*, though at a time when most Sephardic Jews were abandoning Harlem for the Bronx.³⁹ The Amateaus, too, initially settled in the Bronx, but soon gravitated towards Queens' whiter (indeed, racially restrictive), spacious North Shore, where they could purchase the borough's affordable homes with gardens designed for lower middle- and working-class families, many Italians among them.⁴⁰

³⁶ Amateau's passenger record, preserved by The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island archive, shows him arriving in July of 1933: Harold Amato, passenger number 9011991090803. He may have circumvented immigration quotas by traveling on a newly acquired Turkish passport. Micaela Amateau Amato email to author, 24 May 2021.

³⁷ Aviva Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews*, ch. 5: Louis M. Hacker, "The Communal Life of the Sephardic Jews in New York City," *Jewish Social Service Quarterly* 3, 2 (1926): 32–40.

³⁸ Aviva Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews*, 273–74 n22; Jeffrey S. Gurock, *The Jews of Harlem: The Rise, Decline, and Revival of a Jewish Community* (New York, 2016). The familiarity Sephardic Jews felt for the neighborhood's Spanish speakers arises from memoiristic writing and oral histories with immigrant Sephardim in New York City. See, for example, a translation of an article in the Ladino press of New York City that emphasizes the interplay between Spanish and Ladino-language speakers in this immigrant community: "When Spanish Is No Longer a Jewish Language: Immigrant Encounters on The Streets of New York City (1928)," in Julia Phillips Cohen and Sarah Abrevaya Stein, eds., *Sephardi Lives: A Documentary History 1700–1950* (Stanford, 2016), 362–64.

³⁹ Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews*, 153.

⁴⁰ In Queens, 56 percent of three hundred developments built between 1935 and 1947 had racially restrictive covenants, while fully 85 percent of larger subdivisions had them. Richard Rothstein, *A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York, 2017), ch. 5. On the flight of Jews from Harlem: Jeffrey S. Gurock, *Jews in Gotham: New York City Jews in a Changing City, 1920–2010* (New York, 2013), 106. Four Amateau siblings (Mathilda, Reina Marie, Edward, and Harold) lived in the borough: in Rego Park, Forest Hills, Flushing, and Bayside, respectively. Another brother, Jack, settled in Brooklyn. The family's short sojourn in the Bronx was in Grand Concourse.

The Amateau home in the Bayside neighborhood of Queens boasted a garden dense with medicinal herbs and flowers raised by Amateau's mother Rachel Amateau (née Capeluto). Under her green thumb, roses grew to 6 feet, and when they flowered Rachel Amateau candied their petals; she also preserved the rinds of the oranges and lemons that flourished in her verdant yard. There were grapes, mint, thyme, gardenias, and ruda. Remembers Micaela Amateau Amato, Amateau's daughter, the garden was the family's medicine cabinet, as well as its grocery store and refrigerator.⁴¹ This space also provided the raw ingredients for Caribbean Botanical Gardens' unique concoctions, a portion of which were prepared by Amateau's mother.

Here, in this verdant garden in Bayside, the chapters of our story converge. The Rhodesli Jews' historic embrace of plants and herbalism fused with Amateau's experience as a cross-cultural trader in Central and Southern Africa and transplanted them to the multi-cultural environment of New York City, the nursery for Caribbean Botanical Garden. The store opened in the predominantly Black/Latinx/Caribbean East Harlem in the early to mid-1930s.

Whether Amateau was aware of it or not, there were a good number of Jews in or on the edges of the spiritual wares business at the time, most of them working and living in the American south and catering to Black consumers. Many early botánicas were little more than repurposed drugstores or pharmacies that came to stock spiritual cures or the "*materia médica*" of Hoodoo at the behest of Black patrons. Given the prominence of immigrant Jews as pharmacists and drugstore owners in Europe, the United States, and Southern Africa, and the related barrier that at that time kept American Jewish students from entering medical school (and other professional schools), it is no surprise that such shops were frequently Jewish owned.⁴² This was true of Harry's Occult Shop, founded in Philadelphia in 1917 by Russian Jewish immigrant Harry Seligman. As Philadelphia's Black community swelled during the Great Migration, Seligman encountered customers requesting powders and oils unfamiliar to him. He began to research, sell, and produce spiritual products

⁴¹ Author's phone conversation with Micaela Amateau Amato, 13 May 2019, and her emails to the author.

⁴² Long, *Spiritual Merchants*, 143–44. In Central Europe, Jews were over-represented in these fields (as in the cognate industries of soaps, cosmetics, and chemical production), but they blossomed as owners and specialists in drugstores and pharmacies in the United States at a time when Jews were barred from the medical profession. On Jewish pharmacists: Frank Leimkugel, *Wege jüdischer Apotheker: Die Geschichte deutscher und österreichischungarischer Pharmazeuten* (Frankfurt, 1991); Otto Emil Ruhmer and Arthur G. Zupko, *Some Contributions by Jews to Pharmacy: A Historical Survey* (Ann Arbor, 1960); Lynn M. Thomas, "Skin Lighteners, Black Consumers and Jewish Entrepreneurs in South Africa," *History Workshop Journal* 73, 1 (2012): 259–83. Notably, some Ottoman Jews served as pharmacists, including Elia Carmona, who apprenticed with a Greek-Orthodox employer.

under his own label, eventually transforming his modest pharmacy into an occult institution.⁴³

Joseph Meyer was the main supplier of bulk herbs in early to mid-twentieth-century America, through his company Indiana Botanic Gardens, founded in 1910 and located in Hamond, Indiana. He was also Jewish, an immigrant from Germany, and responsible for publishing *The Herbalist*, a volume which has since seen at least seventeen reprintings.⁴⁴ Meyer's chatty, informative catalogue featured detailed instructions on the uses of medicinal and magical herbs, leaves, seeds, roots, and flowers such as High John the Conqueror Root, Adam and Eve Root, Dragons Blood, Grains of Paradise, and Stumbul Root. In both catalogues and book, Meyer cannily hedged his bets, catering to an audience of white consumers of herbs and herbal derivatives and spiritual practitioners of color at the selfsame time.⁴⁵ Like so many of the businesses described here, Meyer's passed through the generations: after his death in 1950, his grandson Clarence Meyer gathered his grandfather's unpublished work for posthumous publication. By his own death at ninety-four, in 1997, Clarence himself had written nine books on folk medicine and herbalism.⁴⁶

Seligman and Meyer were joined in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s by other Jewish merchants who operated squarely within or on the fluid edges of the spiritual wares trade, catering primarily to Black, Latinx, and Caribbean clients.⁴⁷ The immigrant Hungarian Jewish chemist Morton Neumann of Chicago would prove the most powerful of the lot. Neumann's Lucky Brown Cosmetics, created in 1926, became among the most important purveyors of Black beauty products in the country.⁴⁸ Working with his wife Rose, Neumann

⁴³ In 1945, Harry's son Jim Seligman took over the shop. Today it is run by Jim's daughter Marcia Seligman-Finnegan. Author interview with Marty Mayer, 5 Dec. 2019.

⁴⁴ Joseph Ernest Meyer, *The Herbalist and Herb Doctor* (Hammond, 1918).

⁴⁵ "Banker-Botanist Dies" [obituary of Joseph E. Meyer], *Terre Haute Star* 10 Mar. 1950; Joseph S. Pete, "Indiana Botanic Gardens," *Lost Hammond Indiana* (Charleston, 2020), 183–86.

⁴⁶ Kenan Heise, "Obituaries: Clarence Meyer, Author and Herbal Researcher," *Chicago Tribune* 14 May 1997, MC_A10.

⁴⁷ In this, the spiritual ware, pharmacological, and cosmetic industries resemble other economic niches in which American Jews catered to a Black or minority consumer public. Marni Davis, "Toward an 'Immigrant Turn' in Jewish Entrepreneurial History: A View from the New South," *American Jewish History* 103, 4 (2019): 429–56; Diner, *Roads Taken*, ch. 3; Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, 2009), ch. 3; Clive Webb, "Jewish Merchants and Black Customers in the Age of Jim Crow," *Southern Jewish History* 2 (1999): 55–80.

⁴⁸ For the broader context: Lynn M. Thomas, *Beneath the Surface: A Transnational History of Skin Lighteners* (Durham, 2020); Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York, 1998); Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (Oxford, 2002); Nina G. Jablonski, *Skin: A Natural History* (Berkeley, 2006); Modern Girl around the World Research Group (Alys Eve Weinbaum, Lynn M. Thomas, Priti Ramamurthy, Uta G. Poiger, Madeleine Y. Dong and Tani E. Barlow), "The Modern Girl around the World: Cosmetics Advertising and the Politics of Race and Style," in Modern Girl Research Group, eds., *The Modern Girl around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham, 2008); Susannah Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920–1975* (Lexington, 2007).

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IMAGE 5: Advertisement for Sweet Georgia Brown Face Powder by Valmor, 1946. Advertisement courtesy of Made in Chicago Museum.

developed an expansive mail-order catalog that included lotions, creams, incense, skin lighteners that commodified colorism, and magical cures like “Follow Me Boy” sachet powder and “Kiss me Now” perfume. Sales were buoyed when Neumann began collaborating with the immensely talented Black graphic artist Charles C. Dawson (image 5).⁴⁹

⁴⁹ “Valmor Products Co, est. 1926,” Made in Chicago Museum, <https://www.madeinchicagomuseum.com/single-post/famous-products-co/> (last consulted 24 June 2020); “Valmor Products Label Collection (1934–1944),” Special Collections c00117, Chicago Public Library. On skin lighteners, and Jews’ place within the industry: Lynn M. Thomas, “Skin Lighteners”; and *Beneath the Surface*.

Other Jewish purveyors of spiritual wares include Eleanor and Theodore Blum, who operated Hy-Test Drugstore on Chicago's South Side. The Charleston Cut-Rate Drugstore, opened in 1936 by David Epstein, served Charleston for almost fifty years. In Memphis, Tennessee, Joseph Menke and Morris Shapiro co-owned Lucky Heart Cosmetics and Spiritual Supplies. LeRue Marx, also of Memphis, produced Hoyt's cologne. Marcus Menke founded and ran Clover Horn Company in Baltimore. Occult publisher Joseph W. Kay (also known as Joseph Spitalnik) founded Empire Publishing and Dorene Publishing, while "Mikhail Strabo" (Sydney J. Rosenfeld Steiner) owned Guidance House, a publisher of books on Hoodoo and Spiritualism.⁵⁰ Jews did not have a corner on the spiritual wares market—Caribbean Botanical Garden, for example, clutched the commercial coattails of Guatemalan-born Alberto Rendon's West Indies Botanical Garden—but their prominence is noteworthy, nonetheless.

In time, the world of Jewish spiritual merchants came to be crosscut by collaboration and competition. But there is little reason to believe that Amateau was aware of or connected to this early network of peers, even if he relied on Meyer's influential guides to herbalism. Relative to some of the aforementioned commercial powerhouses, Amateau's Caribbean Botanical Garden was a tiny shop, and a neighborhood shop. According to family lore, the small size of the operation resonated with customers, who found it private and inviting. Caribbean Botanical Garden's bilingual Spanish/English signage tempted shoppers with the promise of "books, herbs, oils, and roots." Candles, saintly statues and portraits, and Tarot of Orìṣà cards were visible in the window, along with miscellaneous bottles of oils. Inside, one could find supplies for the practice of folk Catholicism, Espiritismo, African American Hoodoo, and, in time, Santería/Ocha. In the store's far back, Amateau had a station for private consultations; for, like most botánicas, Caribbean Botanical Garden had two sections, each with its own spiritual and commercial quality. The more spacious front of the store foregrounded merchandise for sale and the spiritual traditions catered to within. The back, by contrast, provided an intimate space for the owner to prepare remedies and advise clients.⁵¹

Though it has proven impossible to obtain testimonials of Amateau's patrons, we can learn about them and their view of Amateau through a variety

⁵⁰ Long, *Spiritual Merchants*; Caroline Long interviews with Ed Kaye (29 Mar. 1997), Eleanor Blum (7 Mar. 1995), Nattie Seligman (27 May 1995), Martin Mayer (16 Nov. 1995), and Sal Volpe (19 Sept. 1996), kindly shared with the author. See also: Catherine Yronwode, "Jews and Judaism in Hoodoo: Jewish Suppliers to the African American Hoodoo and Conjure Community," <https://www.luckymojo.com/jewsinhoodoo.html> (last consulted 20 June 2020). Long cites an interview with Cut-Rate founder David Epstein's wife, Ann Epstein, who worked in the store. According to Ann Epstein, the Cut-Rate began to carry spiritual products in 1955 at the behest of customers. These products came to occupy "a tremendous portion of the store," drawing customers from "all over North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia, and from all the Sea Islands around here." *Spiritual Merchants*, 150–51.

⁵¹ Jones et al., "3 Invisible Hospitals," 46–47.

of sources and perspectives. According to Amateau's daughter Micaela Amateau Amato (also known as Michele Amateau), her father's diverse patrons shared their "miseries, griefs, and joys" with her father, and accepted him as a powerful healer in his own right. "I remember during the 1950s," she has recalled, "I would go with him during the summer, spent hours in the store.... He would sit for hours (it seemed) in his office, in the back of store, talking very intimately with different clients—Catholic, I don't know what else. He was talking about their personal lives and giving them herbs and powders that would help them heal. I think it wasn't just physical healing...."⁵² Amateau's relationship with his clients was not merely commercial—he was, at least per his daughter's account, accepted as a healer, a confidant, and an authority.⁵³ Like so many other botánicas, Amateau's filled a niche for patrons who might not have trusted or been able to afford or access a licensed physician.⁵⁴

It is likely that Amateau's blindness was considered a mark of promise, as the myth of the blind prophet or healer whose lack of sight only sharpens his vision is an ancient and potent one in folk Catholicism, and for followers of the Gullah religion and practitioners of Hoodoo and Vodou. It is also possible that Amateau's Jewishness contributed to his success. Elizabeth McAlister has ably explored the long history of Afro-Haitian practitioners of Vodou (and their iconic musical parades, *Raras*) enacting "the Jew" either as a subject of demonization or a mystical ancestor.⁵⁵ Nor can we exclude the possibility that as a Jew and an "Oriental" Amateau commanded authority as a "money maker."⁵⁶ In these ways, Amateau's Jewishness may well have bolstered his authoritative and spiritual air, much like other Muslim, Christian, and Jewish migrant merchants from the Mediterranean served as "authenticators" of the products they sold.⁵⁷

⁵² Murphy, *Botánicas*; Polk and Consentino, *Botánica Los Angeles*; Anahí Viladrich, "Between Bellyaches and Lucky Charms: Revealing Latinos' Plant-Healing Knowledge and Practices in New York City," Andrea Pieroni and Ina Vanderbroek, eds., *Traveling Cultures and Plants: The Ethnobiology and Ethnopharmacy of Human Migrations* (Berghahn, 2009), 64–85.

⁵³ In this respect, Amateau strikes me as different from the Jewish curio traders brilliantly explored by David Koffman. Amateau was not so much engaging in "identity play" as a "marketing technique," as were Koffman's subjects, but was participating in the mutual construction of spiritual traditions (albeit as part of a commercial exchange) that was in keeping with the nature of the botánica itself. Koffman, *Jews' Indian*, 103. Notably, Amateau Amato's sister Judy Hazary's perceptions differ, since in her recollection her father "always gave non-spiritual advice ... practical middle class advice to non middle class questions [sic]." Judy Hazary email to Micaela Amateau Amato, shared with author with Hazary's permission, 26 May 2021.

⁵⁴ Alberto Gomez-Beloz and Noel Chaves, "The Botánica as a Culturally Appropriate Health Care Option for Latinos," *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* 7, 5 (2001): 537–46.

⁵⁵ Elizabeth McAlister, "The Jew in the Haitian Imagination," in Henry Goldschmidt and Elizabeth McAlister, eds., *Race, Nation, and Religion in the Americas* (Oxford, 2004), ch. 2.

⁵⁶ Lauren Derby, "Haitians, Magic, and Money: *Raza* and Society in the Haitian-Dominican Borderlands, 1900–1937," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 36, 3 (1994): 488–526.

⁵⁷ Pastor, *Mexican Mahjar*, 227. The point evokes Julia Philips Cohen's exploration of émigré Sephardic Jewish merchants' strategic use of their "Orientalness," and Jacob Norris' reconstruction

Location was (also) everything. Caribbean Botanical Garden was far from Amateau's Bayside home, but its location allowed the business cannily to weather demographic changes underway in East Harlem. The neighborhood, once the land of the Lenape indigenous peoples, was by the turn of the century predominately white (Italian, German, Irish, and East European Jewish), and in the years after the First World War, rapidly became an African-American and Afro-Caribbean mecca. The shop's address, 80 East 115th Street, was two doors from Alberto Rendón's enormously popular West Indies Botanical Garden, the first botánica of New York City.⁵⁸ Amateau's must have hoped for a spill-over of clients, or that the address itself lent his store credibility. Equally as important, Caribbean Botanical Garden was a mere seven blocks from Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church at 115th St and Pleasant Avenue, then the epicenter of New York City's largest Italian neighborhood.⁵⁹ The heart of the community was the church, which housed a revered statute of the Virgin Mary that is one of only three in the United States to have been blessed and venerated by the Pope. Since 1884, the church has held an annual feast on 16 July in honor of the Virgin Mary during which the Madonna is paraded through the neighborhood followed by those whom she has healed. When the Italian community of East Harlem was at its height, in the decade that Amateau opened Caribbean Botanical Garden, half a million revelers joined the Festa each year.⁶⁰ This was a community hungry for the goods Amateau sold, and he could communicate with them easily in native Italian.

Black consumers, too, would have been crucial to the business, not only those who lived in or near East Harlem, but those who lived elsewhere in New York City—many botánica patrons prefer the discretion ensured by an establishment at a distance from home. The Harlem Renaissance gave Hoodoo a boost, drawing the interest of pioneering intellectuals like Zora Neale Hurston. Famously, in the late 1920s Hurston conducted anthropological field work throughout the American South among Hoodoo doctors (including the legendary priestess Marie Laveau), undergoing initiations to become a practitioner as well.⁶¹ Beyond the intellectual milieu, the popularity of Hoodoo remained

of Bethlehem's Ottoman-era mercantile and artisan diaspora; Cohen, "Oriental by Design"; Norris, "Exporting the Holy Land."

⁵⁸ Murphy, *Botánicas*; Migene González Wippler, *Santeria: The Religion, Faith, and Magic* (New York, 1989), 283–84.

⁵⁹ The sizable Italian population of East Harlem numbered eighty-nine thousand first- and second-generation Italian immigrants in 1930, and clustered between 96th and 125th Street from Lexington Avenue to the East River. Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950* (New Haven, 1995).

⁶⁰ Marie J. Consistre, "A Study of a Decade in the Life and Education of the Adult Immigrant Community in East Harlem" (PhD diss., New York University, 1943); Marie J. Consistre, "Italian East Harlem," in Francesco Cordasco and Eugene Bucchioni, eds., *The Italians: Social Background of an American Group* (Clifton, 1974), 223–60.

⁶¹ Zora Hurston, "Hoodoo in America," *Journal of American Folklore* 44, 174 (1931): 317–417. This became the "Folks Tales" section of Hurston's *Mules and Men* (Philadelphia, 1935). Richard

robust. By at least 1940 Amateau was targeting African American buyers in need of mail order supplies for the practice of Hoodoo, promoting Caribbean Botanical Garden (as Caribbean Products) in Black newspapers in the Northeast and Midwest. One of his first advertisements, published in the Baltimore-based *Afro-American*, enticed customers with “Spiritualist’s Supplies.” The small advertisement offered loadstones, oils, incense, and candles.⁶² Amateau would maintain this advertising strategy for some years.

By the time of Caribbean Botanical Garden’s opening, Amateau had lived on the island of Rhodes in its Ottoman and Italian incarnation, dwelt and worked in Central and Southern Africa, sojourned with family in Istanbul, and transplanted himself to New York City. One place with which he seemed to have no personal tie was the Caribbean.⁶³ It is true, Jews and New Christians of Iberian descent who moved to Brazil, Surinam, Curaçao, Santo Domingo, Jamaica, and Barbados beginning in the fifteenth century experienced extensive interplay with Black Atlantic and Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices, and these forms of cultural fusion persisted into the modern period.⁶⁴ Yet, these communities had little to no overlap with the world of the Amateaus and Ottoman, Judeo-Spanish-speaking Jewry. The name Amateau pinned upon his shop (Caribbean Botanical Garden) and that which he used to advertise it in the African American press (Caribbean Products) asserted an association with the religion, herbal medicine, and traditions of divination of the Black Atlantic. The name emphatically bridged Amateau’s Mediterranean roots and Atlantic world engagements, claiming an affiliation with Black culture while positioning Caribbean Botanical Garden at a distance from predominant American racial hierarchies.⁶⁵ It was surely also designed to appeal to Harlem’s rapidly growing Caribbean community, which the young entrepreneur would have wanted as patrons.

As ever more Puerto Ricans, Haitians, and eventually Cubans moved to East Harlem in the 1930s and after the Second World War, these communities

Brent Turner, “The Haiti-New Orleans Connection: Zora Neale Hurston as Initiate Observer,” *Journal of Haitian Studies* 8, 1 (2002): 112–33; Carla Kaplan, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters* (New York, 2007), 775; Deborah Plant, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Biography of the Spirit* (Westport, 2007): 98–103. On Hoodoo and the Harlem Renaissance: Jamie Battaglia, “Spells, Spirits, and Charms in the Harlem Renaissance,” *Digital Literature Review* 1 (2014): 20–29.

⁶² Carolyn Long, “The Cracker Jack: A Hoodoo Drugstore in the ‘Cradle of Jazz,’” *Louisiana Cultural Vistas* (Spring, 2014): 64–75.

⁶³ In time, Amateau would become a lover of cruises, sailing to the Caribbean and South America, but it is likely the hobby developed in subsequent decades once his finances allowed.

⁶⁴ For example, the *mandinga*, which were talismanic pouches worn in slavery-era Brazil by Jewish and African “new Christians” who had been converted by choice or force. Matthew Francis Rarey, “Assemblage, Occlusion, and the Art of Survival in the Black Atlantic,” *African Arts* 15, 4 (2018): 20–33. The public expression of Caribbean Jewish spiritual practices also contributed to the cultural mesh that existed between Sephardim and other Caribbean folk in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Surinam: Aviva Ben-Ur, “Purim in the Public Eye: Leisure, Violence, and Cultural Convergence in the Dutch Atlantic,” *Jewish Social Studies* 20, 1 (2013): 32–76.

⁶⁵ Modern Girl around the World Research Group, *Modern Girl*, 41–45.

became central to Caribbean Botanical Garden's patron base.⁶⁶ Within this broad frame, the Sephardic and Puerto Rican communities in East Harlem had particularly intertwined histories. They not only lived alongside one another and spoke the same language (or mutually intelligible forms of the same language), they also worked together, engaged in labor organizing together, patronized one another's businesses, and sometimes their members fell in love and/or married.⁶⁷ The second wife of Amateau's brother Morris/Musani Amato was a Puerto Rican professional flamenco dancer named Anna Anduze. After meeting in New York, the pair moved to Puerto Rico to raise a family and their descendants live there still.⁶⁸

Despite the fact of such Sephardic-Puerto Rican intimacies, when it came to the realm of spiritual knowledge, Amateau would have needed a cultural go-between in tune with the needs of his burgeoning Caribbean neighbors. He found assistance in an employee named Juba, about whom his daughter remembers little aside from the fact that he was "Black, and from the [Caribbean] islands." About Juba we have woefully little to work with aside from his name. This so-called "day name" is commonly used by the Akan Caribbean descendants of enslaved men and women from West Africa (what is currently Ghana), though non-Akan-descended children carry the name as well.⁶⁹ Juba and Amateau were "very close," and Juba was involved in the daily running of the business.⁷⁰ Intermediaries like Juba were instrumental to the botánica industry as a whole, and were particularly necessary for immigrant healers like Amateau; in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chinese doctors in the United States similarly sought out business partners with native

⁶⁶ Richard Kostelanetz, "Invisible Sephardim," *New English Review* (Aug. 2015), https://www.newenglishreview.org/Richard_Kostelanetz/Invisible_Sephardim/ (last consulted 24 June 2020). On the broader arena: Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, *Racial Migrations: New York City and the Revolutionary Politics of the Spanish Caribbean* (Princeton, 2019); Nancy Raquel Mirabal, *Suspect Freedoms: The Racial and Sexual Politics of Cubanidad in New York, 1823–1957* (New York, 2017), ch. 5; Irma Watkins-Owens, *Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants and the Harlem Community, 1900–1930* (Bloomington, 1996); Virginia E. Sánchez Korrol, *From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City* (Berkeley, 1983), esp. 51–85.

⁶⁷ Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews*, 151–59; Aviva Ben-Ur, "We Speak and Write This Language against Our Will": Jews, Hispanics, and the Dilemma of Ladino-Speaking Sephardim in Early 20th Century New York, *American Jewish Archives* 1 & 2 (1998): 131–42; Devin Naar, "Sephardic Jews and Race in the United States, Part III, The Sephardic Jewish Brotherhood of America," *La Ermandad Sefaradi*, 20 July 2020: https://www.facebook.com/1035425769826632/videos/204028987693199/?__so__=watchlist&_rv__=video_home_www_playlist_video_list (last accessed 4 Aug. 2020).

⁶⁸ Thanks to Micaela Amateau Amato for this information, and for sharing with me an email exchange of 12 April 2008 reuniting her and her cousins with Musani and Anna's grandson, Moises S. Hernandez-Amateau.

⁶⁹ Maureen Warner Lewis, "Cultural Reconfigurations in the African Caribbean," in Isidore Okpewho, Carole Boyce Davis, and Ali Al'Amin Mazrui, eds., *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities* (Bloomington, 2001), 23.

⁷⁰ Author's interview with Micaela Amateau Amato, 19 Sept. 2019.

English and Spanish speakers.⁷¹ To this day, Jewish-owned spiritual wares businesses rely on a largely non-Jewish, Latinx, Caribbean, and Black employee base. Anthony Lopez, the longest-serving employee of Original Products Botanica (a Jewish-owned botánica in the Bronx and a descendent of Caribbean Botanical Garden) calls himself “an underpaid therapist.” The notion that Lopez serves as a “therapist” to his clients references the medical services botánicas provide their customers, who are for various reasons unable or unwilling to consult a practicing physician. The suggestion that he is “underpaid” points also to the complexity of class and race relations that have conditioned Jewish-owned and Latinx, Caribbean, and Black-staffed botánicas for nearly a century.⁷²

Frictions around these issues did not only surface on the botánica floor. According to Amateau’s daughter Micaela Amateau Amato, when her father came home at night, “he smelled very strongly. He didn’t smell like the fathers of other friends. They thought my father was odd and exotic and strange.” Amateau Amato’s sister Judy Hazary also clings to the potent memory of her father’s aroma. “Inside the dimly lit store [of Caribbean Botanical Garden] were the exotic fragrances of incense and soaps which we [daughters] recognized on our father each night he returned from work.” The odors, she has written, “were unique to us. Mysterious and foreign to everyone [else]. We understood without his explanation that we were different from our friends and neighbors, as American as everyone else yet not the same.”⁷³ Upon his skin, Amateau bore the imprint of the products he sold to an Italian, Black, and Brown working class clientele, in a neighborhood less white and middle-class than the one in which his daughters were raised. Still and all, Micaela Amateau Amato perceived the Sephardic and Mediterranean legacy in her father’s work. Her own grandmother frequently wore homegrown, medicinal herbs on her forehead, tucked inside a swath of fabric. “We wore *hamsas*, touched the mezuzah on the door: this was no different. My father was extremely respectful of other religions. I grew up very comfortable with Catholic people, Black people, people who had religions like Santeria.” While her sister cried foul, Amato felt her father’s shop repurposed Jewish spiritual practices. This act of repurposing carried a bit of Rhodes into Harlem and then Queens, utilizing “foreign signs” in a fashion that was entirely in keeping with Caribbean mystical practices.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Tamara Venit Shelton, *Herbs and Roots: A History of Chinese Doctors in the American Medical Marketplace* (New Haven, 2019), ch. 3.

⁷² Kirk Semple, “At a Botanica, New Year Means Renewal, and Jinx Removal,” *New York Times*, 3 Jan. 2010; Jones et al., “3 Invisible Hospitals.”

⁷³ Email by Judy Hazary to Micaela Amateau Amato, 26 May 2021, shared with the author with Hazary’s permission. On the historic value of smells: Melanie A. Kiechle, *Smell Detectives: An Olfactory History of Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (Seattle, 2017), 6.

⁷⁴ Derby, “Imperial Idols,” 397. The approach echoes that of Michael Taussig, who has demonstrated how, in southwest Columbia, Sibundoy Indian healers appropriated and copied icons and images tied to institutions of European power: “History as Sorcery,” in *Shamanism*,

Hazary's discomfort with her father's aroma alerts us to something crucial in Amateau's and Caribbean Botanical Garden's history. For all the cultural melding that went on within Amateau's botánica, the Amateaus drew a boundary between the urban, multi-ethnic, commercialized encounters essential to Caribbean Botanical Garden and the whiter, suburban, domestic environment they claimed as home. Amateau's business was in Harlem, but the family's social capital was invested in Bayside, Queens. Their commitment to Sephardic tradition inevitably shifted by and within this environment. Bayside was not home to many Sephardic Jews aside from the Amateaus, and so the next generation was raised in a majority-Ashkenazi community and affiliated with the majority-Ashkenazi Temple Beth Shalom, which might have felt especially comfortable to Amateau's wife, Ann (née Resnick) Amateau, who was of Ashkenazi background.⁷⁵ Still, the family as a whole were strong in their Sephardic, Italian, and Mediterranean identifications.⁷⁶

Amateau also channeled Jewish tradition within the walls of Caribbean Botanical Garden, though arguably not the biblical or Kabbalistic influences that his clients might have expected. According to one of his daughters, menorahs, stars of David, and Jewish ceremonial objects were among the goods Amateau stocked in the store, notwithstanding the fact that his clientele was overwhelmingly (if not entirely) non-Jewish.⁷⁷ What's more, his botánica commodified—but also transformed—Eastern Mediterranean Jewish and, even more specifically, Rhodesli Sephardic folkways. Harold's mother Rachel grew the herbs and plants her son distilled into oils or sold as cuttings or seedlings, much like her grandmother might have done. She also personally distilled the oils he sold and oversaw the making of curative powders. A particularly precious photograph of Rachel Amateau shows her in front of her roses in her Bayside garden holding what appears to be challah in one hand and a bowl of food in the other. Balanced expertly in her mouth is a lit Pall Mall, her cigarette of choice (image 6). Her garden provided the Rhodesli-inspired raw goods that her son could transform into herbal and herb-derived treatments for a diverse,

Colonialism, and the Wild Man: The Nervous System (*New York, 1992*), 366–92. I am also informed here by Andrew Apter, "History in the Dungeon: Atlantic Slavery and the Spirit of Capitalism in Cape Coast Castle, Ghana," *American Historical Review* 122, 1 (2017): 23–54.

⁷⁵ Author's interview with Micaela Amateau Amato, 19 Sept. 2019.

⁷⁶ Micaela Amateau Amato has made this point to me repeatedly, including in an email of 24 May 2021. Interestingly, Amateau remained loyal to his erstwhile patron, the Alliance Israélite Universelle, into the 1960s, when Ann Amato served as corresponding secretary for the organization's Women's Division. American Friends of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, *Alliance Review* 40, 49 (1966): 35. My thanks to Devin Naar for this reference.

⁷⁷ Micaela Amateau Amato email to author, 1 June 2021. Amateau Amato's sister Judy Hazary's memory differs in this regard: in her eyes, it was a "big secret" that her father was Jewish. Judy Hazary email to Micaela Amateau Amato, 26 May 2021, shared with the author with Hazary's permission.



IMAGE 6: Rachel Amateau in Bayside garden, ca. 1940s. Photograph courtesy of Micaela Amato Amateau.

non-Jewish clientele. Rachel Amateau also helped Caribbean Botanical Garden fuse cultures concretely and chemically, through the mixing and sale of herbal and herbal-derived products.

While Amateau's mother generated the essential botanical ingredients and know-how to craft products for Caribbean Botanical Garden, his daughter Micaela Amateau Amato sewed amulets into which her father placed personalized blessings. Amateau Amato also illustrated the labels Amateau glued on candles and other products.⁷⁸ Rhodes was a source of inspiration for the Amateaus, but together they were embarking on what Raquel Romberg calls "ritual piracy"—the ingenious and fluid melding of competing social, cultural, and aesthetic regimes. This set of regimes included the Rhodesli, Sephardic, Mediterranean, residual Ottoman, early Italian, and Central African, as well as that complex cultural world that took shape in early and mid-century East Harlem.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ The originality and beauty of the labels on botánica products is a source of competition and pride for those in the business today, as it has been for decades. Long, *Spiritual Merchants*, 114–19; interview by Carolyn Long with Priscilla Quiles Wood, 23 Nov. 1994, a transcript of which Long kindly shared; author interview with Marty Marvin, 5 Dec. 2019.

⁷⁹ Raquel Romberg, "Ritual Piracy or Creolization with an Attitude," *New West Indian Guide* 79, 34 (2005): 175–218.

THE SPECTACLE OF THE INVISIBLE

Caribbean Botanical Garden spawned a small empire of Sephardic-run, family-owned botánicas in New York and Atlanta, some of which are today operated by a third generation. As this article draws to a close, I will briefly trace Caribbean Botanical Garden's legacy forward in time, and outward from Harlem to other boroughs of New York City as well as Atlanta, Georgia, highlighting the enduring inheritance of this business.

Amateau's brother Morris/Musani was the second in the family to move into spiritual wares. In 1942, he opened Nidia Botanical Gardens at 70 East 114th, a mere block from Caribbean Botanical Garden. Sal Volpe, an Italian Catholic competitor in the botánica business and one-time partner of Morris/Musani Amateau, has recalled that "Spanish" perfumes made with real floral essences (such as "Jabon de Patchuli" and "Locion Sándalo") were among Nidia's draw. Morris/Musani Amateau imported rose petals in bulk from overseas suppliers to meet demand for the product, and it was said that "the motion of the ship helped extract the scent."⁸⁰ The trade route and context were of the new world, but the commodity was of the old: rose oil had long been produced and treasured by Ottoman Jews.⁸¹ Early on Nidia Botanical Gardens, like Caribbean Botanical Garden, placed advertisements in the African American press, and at times the neighboring shops were promoted in advertisements published side by side (image 7). Yet it was Nidia Botanical Gardens that would prove the enduring business and stake a claim, accurately or not, to be the family's foundational and most significant venture into the botánica industry.

The Amateau family extended its reach in the spiritual wares industry outside of New York City in 1944, when two cousins, Jack and Morris Amato, opened a botánica in Atlanta at 171 Mitchell Street, in the historically Black neighborhood of Southwest Atlanta.⁸² The cousins referred to themselves as the "Brothers Reverend Jack Rondo and Reverend Morris Rondo" in promotional materials, and though they positioned themselves as spiritual authorities of Hoodoo, they were Sephardic Jews from the extended Amato/Amateau clan of Rhodes. (Jack and Morris Amato were both born in Georgia, but their parents, Menashe/Manashe and Luna Amato, were children of Rhodes.⁸³)

⁸⁰ Carolyn Long interview with Sal Volpe, 19 Sept. 1996, a transcript of which Long kindly shared.

⁸¹ Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Making Jews Modern: The Yiddish and Ladino Press in the Russian and Ottoman Empire* (Bloomington, 2003), 128–129, 142.

⁸² On Atlanta's historically black southwest: Maurice J. Hobson, *The Legend of the Black Mecca: Politics and Class in the Making of Modern Atlanta* (Chapel Hill, 2017); Allison Dorsey, *To Build Our Lives Together: Community Formation in Black Atlanta, 1875–1906* (Atlanta, 2004).

⁸³ "Menashe/Manashe Amato," "Luna Amato," "Jack Amato," and "Morris Amato," all have entries at the website "Find A Grave," which shows all four buried in the Jewish section of Atlanta's Greenwood Cemetery, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/147785095/jack-amato> (last consulted 24 June 2020).

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IMAGE 7: Selection of advertisements, including advertisements for Caribbean Products Co. and Nidia Botanical Gardens, *African American* 14 July 1945.

The multi-pronged business they created in 1944 continues to operate under the names Rondo's Luck Shop, Rondo's Temple Sales Co., The Lucky Candle, and Rondo Distributing Co. Rondo's Luck Shop is today managed by a third generation of the family, still actively Jewish, nonetheless represented by the "Reverend Michael Rondo and Reverend Darren Rondo," also known as Michael and Darren Amato. According to its website, Rondo's Luck Shop's "areas of expertise include reuniting loved ones, spell and hex removal and casting, helping out with money and financial situations, employment issues and more."⁸⁴

⁸⁴ At: <https://theluckycandle.com/> (last consulted 24 June 2020).

Back in East Harlem, as Harold Amateau's eyesight failed in the 1960s, he closed Caribbean Botanical Garden and joined his brother Morris/Musani Amateau as a partner in Nidia. Fraternal relations were fraught. At some point the brothers came to distrust each other, with each pointing to the other as untrustworthy.⁸⁵ When Amateau entered retirement in roughly 1969, Morris/Musani Amateau was joined in the business by his son Albert, and these two generations of Amateaus relocated the family operation to 73 East 115th Street, renaming it Nidia/M. & A. Amateau Incorporated. This same year M. & A. Amateau had a number of patent requests approved by the government, including a trademark request for the name "Nidia" itself.⁸⁶ Albert's son Robert joined the company in 1971, and Robert's brother Steve joined him as an equal partner after the death of their father and grandfather in 1984. So the business endured in third-generation family hands as a storefront, retail, and mail order operation selling an enormous array of goods—"roots and herbs, books, talismans, religious pictures, fortune telling cards, sheepskin parchment, copper bracelets, saltpeter, lodestone and magnetic sand, camphor tablets, powdered sulfur, mercury, turpentine, ammonia, benzine, and coal tar" as well as baths, floor wash, waters, perfumes, soaps, aerosol sprays, salts, rubbing alcohols, incense, oils, and candles"—much of which were manufactured in the back and upstairs of the building.⁸⁷ Alas, M. & A. Amateau Incorporated succumbed to fire (as do so many botánicas, bursting as they often are with burning candles) in about 2000, forcing the family to reinvent yet again.

Still the legacy persisted, with the arc of time bending back on itself. The fire reunited branches of the family that had once split apart. It happened like this. Amateau's brother-in-law Milton Benezra, who cut his teeth as a spiritual merchant working for M. & A. Amateau Incorporated, had broken away in 1959 to create his own store, Magi Botanical Garden on Bathgate Avenue in the Bronx. There he began to formulate powders, baths, and oils. When the Bathgate store, too, burned in 1969, Benezra and his friend Jack Mizrahi partnered to open a business that would become Original Products Botanica, today located at 2468 Webster Avenue, just down the road from Fordham University.⁸⁸ According to Mizrahi's son Jason, Benezra was a bit more visible in the front of the store where he oversaw its commercial workings, while his father Jack excelled in its private corners and was embraced by patrons as a healer.⁸⁹ After the founding generation of Original

⁸⁵ Descendants of each side of the conflict blame the other side for the relatives' falling out.

⁸⁶ The "Nidia" trademark, serial number 72338839, was filed on 25 September 1969 by M. & A. Amateau, Inc., covering "colognes, perfumes, toilet waters, bath salts and bath oils."

⁸⁷ Long, *Spiritual Merchants*, 213.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 213–14; Carolyn Long interview with Milton Benezra, 2 Oct. 1998, a recording of which Carolyn kindly shared.

⁸⁹ Author's interview with Jack Mizrahi, 18 Sept. 2019. On the binary spatial arrangement of the botánica: Jones et al., "3 Invisible Hospitals," 46–47.



IMAGE 8A: Original Products Botanica, 2486-88 Webster Avenue, New York City. Author's photo.

Products Botanica retired, Jason Mizrahi partnered with Albert Amateau's sons Robert and Steve, erstwhile inheritors of Nidia/M & A Amateau Incorporated. Robert passed away prematurely, but Jason Mizrahi and Steve Amateau continue to run Original Products Botanica to this day, and have kindly opened their doors, memories, and paperwork to me in the course of my research (images 8a and 8b).

Original Products Botanica describes itself as the largest botánica on the east coast, and because of its scale and longevity, the shop has been the subject of various popular articles, including one by the *New York Times* that refers to the business as “a veritable Home Depot of spirituality.”⁹⁰ Indeed, the operation is of daunting size, and a far cry from the modest footprint of Caribbean Botanical Garden. Original Products Botanica boasts a capacious wholesale division on the ground floor, an upper floor devoted to spiritual consulting and candle burning, and an extensive basement dedicated to manufacturing, storing, and packing the shop's expansive mail order stock, which is shipped all over the world. A parallel, family-run enterprise (Original Publications) is devoted to publishing original and reissued books on the Yoruba, Santería, numerology, Wicca,

⁹⁰ Semple, “At a Botanica.”



IMAGE 8B: Original Products Botánica, 2486-88 Webster Avenue, New York City. Author's photo.

astrology, the kabbalah, dreams and numerology, Hoodoo, and Spiritism. These books, too, may be bought on the ground floor of Original Products Botánica.

Scholarly and journalistic coverage of these various, intersecting forays into the spiritual goods industry tells the history of this ambitious Sephardic family and their business ventures variously. Interviews with family members (by myself and, earlier, by Carolyn Long) seem only to confound the effort to pin down a precise chronology or familial or commercial family tree. The jagged picture may well suit the nature of the industry. Record-keeping has been kept impressionistically or chaotically by the family and businesses involved, much has been lost to fire, and competitiveness undergirds the business, resulting in the cagey guarding of proprietary secrets and commercial genealogies.

Putting aside the debate over which family botánica was the first, biggest, or most successful, one thing is clear: Sephardic Jews, and Rhodesli émigrés in particular, exerted an exceptional influence over the botánica industry in New York and across the familial, commercial diaspora that extended from it. One could do worse than track this influence in a 2006 trade book by Wiccan expert Lady Maeve Rhea (writing with Eve Lefay) called *The Enchanted Formulary: Blending Magickal Oils for Love, Prosperity, and Healing*. This foundational guide to the practice of Wicca is dedicated to Jack Mizrahi, Jason Mizrahi, Milton Benezra, and no less than four Amateaus (Morris, Albert, Steve,

and Robert). The list of surnames reads like a Who's Who of Jewish Rhodes, yet there is no acknowledgement in the book, or for that matter anywhere else, that botánica history is so thoroughly crosscut with Sephardic culture.⁹¹

If the industry's own literature erases its Sephardic history, for the families involved, botánica history is immensely present. This is not just true for the third and fourth generations who continue to operate family businesses in New York and Atlanta. Though Aron Amateau/Harold Amato's descendants have no foot in the spiritual goods trade, the fact of the family botánica casts ripples across the generations. Amateau's daughter Micaela Amateau Amato, who once hand-drew labels and prayers for her father's modest shop, is now an artist and Emerita Professor of Art at Pennsylvania State University, producing art that self-consciously reflects the influence of her father's commitment to alternative healing and her Sephardic past, including multi-media work that features repurposed photographs of Caribbean Botanical Garden (image 9).⁹² Amateau Amato has also created neon-lighted Ladino and English-language texts that are (in the artist's words) "private lamentations or cries for social justice"—one of these, "I am the Spectacle of the Invisible," a phrase drawn from her daughter Cara Judea Alhadeff's writing, provides this sub-section its evocative title.⁹³

This article is not intended, as I hinted at its outset, to be a story of the Jewish strange. For those in the extended Amateau/Amato family, for those who

⁹¹ Lady Maeve Rhea with Eve LeFey, *The Enchanted Formulary: Blending Magickal Oils for Love, Prosperity, and Healing* (New York, 2006). For a time, Lady Rhea operated the Pagan Center of New York from the second floor of Original Products Botanica. Relevant or not, one of the current owners of Original Products Botanica dismisses Lady Rhea as "a bullshit artist." Author's interview with Jack Mizrahi and Steve Amateau, 18 Sept. 2019; author's interview with Micaela Amateau Amato, 19 Sept. 2019; Semple, "At a Botanica."

⁹² Per a recent artist's statement: "Micaela Amato explores the depth, history and tension of the past, both her specific family origins and the broader origins of human culture in her series of cast leaded glass busts and figures.... Amato derives inspiration from the weight of history, but adds to her sculptures specific links with her own life. She is particularly interested in natural healing and the curative properties of herbs and other natural medicines. Her father operated a botanic in New York City in which he sold medicinal herbs and religious artifacts. From a young age, Amato developed a respect for patterns of living and healing that connected her to her Spanish, Jewish heritage. Her ancestors were expelled from Spain in 1492 and scattered over the Mediterranean basin where they maintained their particular Sephardic customs." At: <https://www.heatherjames.com/artist-intro/?at=MICAEELAAMATO> (last consulted 24 June 2020).

⁹³ Micaela Amateau Amato, "Welcome the Stranger, Reimagining Heroes Past and Present: Work by Micaela Amateau Amato," *The Markaz: Arts Center for the Greater Middle East*, https://www.themarkaz.org/welcome_the_stranger (last consulted 24 June 2020); Amateau Amato, "In Her Own Words," *Sephardic Horizons* 10, 3-4 (Fall 2020), <https://www.sephardichorizons.org/Volume10/Issue2/Amato.html> (last consulted 29 January 2022); emails of 3 and 10 May 2019 by Micaela Amateau Amato to author. Other work by Amateau Amato includes a series of sculptural figures entitled "Exiles & Nomads," which features cast glass heads mostly of women, each in an animated posture and mottled with protuberances akin to healing poultices. With titles such as "Aljama" and "Nidea," the arresting works evoke a Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and Spanish past cut through with Amato's personal history. Amateau Amato's collages repurpose on transparent acetate her father's photographs of Rhodes, Turkey, southern Africa, even the interior of Caribbean Botanical Garden.



IMAGE 9: Micaela Amateau Amato, “115th Street.” Multi-media art courtesy of Micaela Amato Amateau.

patronized (or still patronize) Caribbean Botanical Garden, Nidia Botanical Garden, M. & A. Amateau Inc, Original Products Botanica, or Rondo’s Luck Shop, the family’s past merges seamlessly with a spiritual and commercial present—so much so that some of the founding generation of Sephardic botánica owners positioned themselves, and by some accounts were embraced by clients, as healers, seers, mystics, conjurers, or Hoodoo Reverends in their own right.

This exploration has infused the botánica with a Jewish and Eastern Mediterranean dimension that deepens what we know of the complexity of these commercial, spiritual, racialized, and cultural spaces. Jewish family trees loom large in this account of the early spiritual wares trade in the United States, with roots deeply impacted in Europe, the Ottoman Empire, Italy, Mediterranean, and Central Africa, as in urban American neighborhoods such as East Harlem, Southwest Atlanta, and Chicago’s South Side. So too this study—much like

Micaela Amateau Amato's neon art and Richard Kostelanetz's ruminations—has cast light on invisible chapters of Sephardic history. It illuminates a meandering and intriguingly non-linear tale of racial encounters and reinventions, through which a Rhodesli, Ottoman, Italian, Jewish émigré became a white merchant in southern and Central Africa before reinventing himself as a purveyor of Italo-Afro-Latinx-Caribbean spiritual goods and something of a mystic, too, in East Harlem.⁹⁴ Building upon literature on Jews' gravitation towards certain ethnic, mercantile niches, I have pointed to a hidden domain of such activity—the spiritual wares trade—and leveraged it to explore Sephardic émigré merchants' commercial relationships with the Black, Caribbean, Latinx, and Italian consumers who patronized their shops.

Some Jewish-owned botánicas operating today bear little resemblance to Caribbean Botanical Garden: they have become empires, “Home Depots,” carrying everything from statues of Jesús Malverde, patron saint of drug dealers, to vape pens. Yet even as product lines expand, certain trusted, essential items that Amato might have sold in the 1930s remain in stock—the statuary, the Tarot cards, the essential oils and herbs, the candles. This is true even of highly “sanitized” places like Marty Mayer's expansive Indio Products, “The World's Most Complete Manufacturer and Distributor of Spiritual, Religious, and New Age Items,” which Marty kindly toured me through in its most recent, East Los Angeles location adjacent the L. A. River, in an industrial district near where the 710 crosses Highway 5.

Telling a story of “botánicas Sephardicas” allows us to grapple with the nuanced Eastern Mediterranean dimension of botánica history and to render visible Jews who were always perceptible in their own commercial, familial, spiritual, and racial orbits, but who have been rendered invisible to a wider public and scholarly eye. To do so is to shed light on a variety of entanglements (of race, class, religion, and neighborhoods) that take shape at the meeting of multiple diasporas and trans-oceanic flows. Aron Amato/Harold Amateau would surely have packed the box more neatly. Hopefully with his intuitive vision, he would also see some truth in this account.

⁹⁴ Building on Naar, “Our White Supremacy Problem.”

Abstract: This article traces the genealogy of a Jewish-owned *botánica* located in East Harlem in the 1930s and 1940s. *Botánicas* are understood to manifest an intricate, transatlantic religious, spiritual, and healing world, offering herbal products, sacramental goods, ritual implements, and counseling to Italian, Latinx, Black, and Caribbean practitioners of folk Catholicism, herbalism, hoodoo, Vodou, Santería, Espiritismo, Curanderismo, Òriṣà worship and other ethnomedical and spiritual systems. Yet this *botánica* was owned by an Eastern Mediterranean Jew from the Ottoman/Italian island of Rhodes, and it integrated Sephardic and Mediterranean histories and sources of inspiration. Extraordinarily, this history stands for a greater whole. Jews were pioneering spiritual merchants in the United States. Restoring their history requires journeying globally, beginning with Ottomans' fidelity to herbalism; tracing émigré Sephardic Jews' uneven dialogue with Black African men and women in colonial Central and Southern Africa; and delving into the commercial, spiritual, and racial interplay furthered by Jewish-owned pharmacies and *botánicas* in New York City, Baltimore, Atlanta, Memphis, Charleston, Chicago, and Los Angeles and by Jewish spiritual merchants and their Caribbean, Latinx, and Black patrons. All this introduces an unexpected Jewish and Mediterranean history to the *botánica*, and an unexpectedly multifarious spiritual, mercantile, and racial dimension to Jewish history.

Key words: Jewish history, Mediterranean history, transatlantic history, global history, Sephardic history, spiritual wares, *botánica*