

CHANGE FROM THE PERIPHERY:  
CHRISTIAN WILHELM VON DOHM, DAVID DE ISAAC COHEN NASSY,  
AND AN ATLANTIC JEWISH REPUBLIC OF LETTERS

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It is a warm night in the small Dutch colony of Suriname. Members of the Surinaamse Lettervrienden, an inter-religious Surinamese literary society founded in 1786, have been invited to a public discussion and lecture. The lecture is sure to be an interesting one, dealing with topics that these men have read about in books and letters sent across the ocean from the European continent. These colonial residents have never traveled outside of the small colony, and their only contact with the world beyond Suriname occurs through correspondence and reading books sent from Holland to Suriname's library, which is said to rival its North American counterparts. One person arrives early to the lecture, and is surprised to find every seat vacant. As the hour approaches, it becomes clear that he is the only person who will be in attendance. Hardly seeing the point of presenting a paper to one person, the lecturer leaves.<sup>1</sup>

Situations like these, though seemingly comical, were a serious challenge to Surinamese leaders who were desperately trying to create a colonial intellectual community similar to the ones they'd heard so much about in Europe. Surinamese Jews, who considered themselves the intellectual elite of the colony, recognized that throughout the eighteenth century, the European intelligentsia were carrying on public intellectual conversations via the written word, sharing their ideas about equality and liberty with the general population. But what happened when someone who lived and worked far from Europe wanted to participate in this discourse? The Regenten, or Sephardic (Iberian Jewish) community leaders of the Jewish population in Dutch Suriname, were eager to participate in the pertinent discussions of religious freedom that they understood to be happening in Europe. The leader of the Regenten, David de Isaac Cohen Nassy (1747-1806), was an especially prominent and well-educated member of this community who yearned to be included in the discourse among men whom he saw as his peers. When Christian

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<sup>1</sup> David de Isaac Cohen Nassy, et al., *Historical Essay on the Colony of Surinam, 1788*, translated by Simon Cohen (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1974): 164.

Wilhelm von Dohm (1751-1820), a Prussian historian and a strong supporter of Jewish emancipation, published his *On the Civil Amelioration of the Jews* in 1781, the Regenten were eager to respond. They sent him a letter in 1786, congratulating him on a work that they saw as a turning point for the treatment of Jews in Enlightened Europe. He responded in 1787, asking for “some details on the advantages which your wise and enlightened government accords you.”<sup>2</sup> The Regenten responded in turn with their substantial, exhaustively researched, and decidedly liberal *Historical Essay on the Colony of Surinam*.

This research puts these two texts into conversation with each other. As a prominent intellectual, Christian Wilhelm von Dohm was an insider in the Prussian court and yet held views that placed him in opposition to other prominent European thinkers of his time. David de Isaac Cohen Nassy and the Regenten saw themselves as insiders (as Portuguese residents of the Dutch Republic) but simultaneously as outsiders – members of a minority religious group and residents of an obscure South American colony that they had never had the chance to leave. As direct products of and contributors to the Enlightenment, Dohm and Nassy positioned themselves as simultaneously outsiders and insiders in order to effect significant political and social change within the intellectual movement.

### **Christian Wilhelm von Dohm**

A councilor in the Prussian government, Christian Wilhelm von Dohm was a “radical dei[st],” and his writings were meant to garner attention from heads of state as well as the general public.<sup>3</sup> Dohm’s work *Civil Amelioration* is a relatively short text that is very much a product of its geographical and temporal context. He went against what many people in Europe were thinking about Judaism, while simultaneously writing at the precise moment when Jewish

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<sup>2</sup> Dohm, letter reproduced in the *Historical Essay*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> David Sorkin, *The Transformation of German Jewry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987): 24.

emancipation was up for discussion: “This was the finest flower of the enlightened Prussian bureaucracy, which had set as its purpose the rationalization of the state, making of all nationals productive, useful, and therefore happier members of civil society.”<sup>4</sup> Dohm makes it clear that he believes that Jews have been mistreated by Christian society and therefore have not been able to realize their full potential. Dohm “attributed Jewish immorality to Christian laws,” which he saw as stifling Jews’ ability to fully participate in European culture and society.<sup>5</sup> His argument revolves around creating a more inclusive Prussian constitution, offering specific policy revisions that would make Jews more equipped to live peacefully and fruitfully on the European continent. Dohm wanted to see Jews integrated into European society, and his revolutionary work was one of many that fueled a serious and challenging debate about religious freedoms in an Enlightenment world.<sup>6</sup>

### **David de Isaac Cohen Nassy**

David de Isaac Cohen Nassy, too, is a challenging historical figure. A prominent physician and scholar, he was born and raised in Suriname but tried to leave the colony in search of a better, more religiously tolerant society. He found this tolerance when he moved to Philadelphia in 1792, having grown frustrated with the lack of liberalization in Suriname.<sup>7</sup> Even before the publication of the *Essay*, however, Nassy was a prominent figure in Jewish Atlantic life. He came from the Nassy family, which had produced numerous Dutch military heroes as well as the founder of the Jewish colony in Suriname, David Nassy (two generations removed from David de Isaac Cohen Nassy). David Nassy the elder (1612-1685) was likely born in

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<sup>4</sup> Frank E. Manuel, *The Broken Staff: Judaism Through Christian Eyes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992): 275.

<sup>5</sup> Manuel, 276.

<sup>6</sup> Manuel, 275.

<sup>7</sup> Jacob R. Marcus, “Foreword,” *Historical Essay on the Colony of Surinam, 1788*, translated by Simon Cohen (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1974): xi.

Portugal, but he moved to Amsterdam by 1634.<sup>8</sup> He lived a nomadic life, spending time in Dutch Brazil and Curaçao before signing papers with the Dutch West India Company that granted him the land he needed to establish a Jewish colony on the South American mainland. Thus, in 1657, Nassy had established a Jewish colony with a tax-exempt status and the right to build a synagogue.<sup>9</sup> The agricultural community of Joden Savanne and the port city of Paramaribo were Jewish colonial centers, providing the Jews with connections to others in the colony as they accumulated wealth first through cash crops (specifically sugar cane and coffee) and then through Atlantic trade systems. In 1659, Nassy left Suriname to found a new colony in Cayenne. His robust relationship with the Dutch led him to move around and across the Atlantic numerous times, constantly making new investments in different commercial ventures. Various groups of Jews moved through the Atlantic and settled permanently and impermanently in Nassy's colonies, but it seems that a core group of Jewish merchants and community leaders remained with Nassy throughout his travels.<sup>10</sup> Why were these Sephardic Jews such attractive colonial inhabitants? A new colony requires a stable population and a leader with economic acumen. The Dutch had found that shrewd leadership in Nassy, and they found that stable population in the Jews displaced by European conflict. Who better to populate a new colony than a group of people firmly tied together by religion and community in search of a new homeland? Suriname, then, was a safe haven for Jews who had been drifting around the Atlantic since the Reconquista.

David de Isaac Cohen Nassy (who shares the elder Nassy's name but was born over a century later) followed his ancestors and assumed the role of the leader of the Sephardic Jewish

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<sup>8</sup> Wim Klooster, "Networks of Colonial Entrepreneurs: The Founders of the Jewish Settlements in Dutch America, 1650s and 1660s," *Atlantic Diasporas: Jews, Conversos, and Crypto-Jews in the Age of Mercantilism, 1500-1800*, ed. Richard L. Kagan and Philip D. Morgan (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009): 43.

<sup>9</sup> Klooster, *Atlantic Diasporas*, 44.

<sup>10</sup> Klooster, *Atlantic Diasporas*, 46.

community in Suriname. He is believed to be the primary author of the *Essay*, as he was the leader of the Regenten. Here, I will assume that Nassy is the primary author of the *Essay*, but I will try to be as inclusive as possible by also referring to the *Essay*'s authors in the plural. The *Essay* is a response to Dohm's book, following a series of letters exchanged between Dohm and Nassy. Five years after *Civil Amelioration* was published, the Regenten sent a letter to Dohm congratulating him on his successful work and mentioning the relative liberty that they enjoyed under the Dutch government. Dohm replied enthusiastically, requesting more detailed information about life in Suriname, particularly having to do with relationships between Jews and gentiles, commercial activities permitted to the community, property ownership, taxation, family restrictions, and military service.<sup>11</sup> Nassy and the Regenten, in turn, responded with the *Essay*, an over-200-page text detailing the history of the colony with a Jewish slant. The work was published in the Surinamese Dutch capital city of Paramaribo in 1788. The *Essay*, as well as Dohm's *Civil Amelioration*, uses the language of the Enlightenment to join in the conversation about Jews that was happening throughout the last decades of the eighteenth century.

Although Nassy's book deals with many of the same issues as Dohm's, the text has a very different structure and thesis. The *Essay* was meant for a wide audience, despite being published as a response to an individual's correspondence. It sought to redefine colonial history with an emphasis on how Jews contributed fully to every aspect of colonial life. The book celebrates Jewish freedoms in Suriname while simultaneously making it clear that Jews deserve a central place in Christian Europe. The book does not argue for assimilation; these men were relatively content with their place as colonial residents of Suriname. However, the *Essay* argues that their contributions to the colony as its founding members and often some of its most

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<sup>11</sup> Dohm, letter reproduced in the *Historical Essay*, 13.

economically productive citizens deserve recognition. They state that “if one carefully examines the various events of the colony, the character of its first settlers, their capacity and even their wealth, one will see that Surinam had the good fortune of having been founded and then enlarged by worthy people whom the persecutions of the Inquisition, that of Cromwell, the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, and a thousand other circumstances threw together there as though by chance.”<sup>12</sup> The book is divided into two sections: the first details the history of the colony from the first Dutch settlements in Suriname, and the second provides insights into contemporary cultural, intellectual, and political life.

### **Enlightenment**

It is important to attempt to conceptualize the world of these sources. I’ll begin by characterizing the nature of the relationship between Dohm and Nassy. In many ways, this relationship is very typical of what Dena Goodman calls the “epistolary commerce” of the eighteenth century.<sup>13</sup> According to Goodman, this type of exchange was very common: “readers often responded to writers by writing to them directly.”<sup>14</sup> This network of letters was distinctive and fascinating: “the reciprocity of correspondence both reflected and strengthened the sense of equality that structured relations among citizens of the Republic of Letters. Reciprocity was the fundamental virtue of the republic.”<sup>15</sup> By Goodman’s standards, then, Dohm and Nassy were ideal citizens of the Republic of Letters. So why is this correspondence between Dohm and Nassy relevant?

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<sup>12</sup> Nassy, 36.

<sup>13</sup> Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994): 142.

<sup>14</sup> Goodman, 142. See also Robert Darnton, “Readers Respond to Rousseau,” in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1984).

<sup>15</sup> Goodman, 18.

Dohm and Nassy were contributing to a larger Enlightenment conversation about the role of Judaism in the European metropolitan and colonial community. Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781), both of whom were contemporaries of Dohm and Nassy, can provide fruitful information about how Jews and non-Jews conversed about Judaism in the Enlightenment world. Moses Mendelssohn was a powerful voice in the Enlightenment, a German Jew who combined his strong religious faith with a complete devotion to Enlightenment ideals. By the mid-18th century, his contemporaries called him “the German Socrates.”<sup>16</sup> Mendelssohn was known first as an intellectual voice and second as a Jew<sup>17</sup> – this dual identity and the relative unimportance of his religion in his intellectual relationships points to his ability to participate fully in Enlightenment discourse despite coming from a very different cultural background than many of his peers. A “philosophical soulmate”<sup>18</sup> of Mendelssohn, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing was a non-Jew who came to the conclusion that Jews deserved equal treatment in the Enlightenment world. He wrote the play *Nathan the Wise*, “a scathing indictment of the intolerance that Lessing considered the scourge of his age.”<sup>19</sup> The play deals with the relationships between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam through the eyes of the character Nathan the Wise (likely based on Mendelssohn), and argues that it is neither possible nor important to know which group consists of God’s chosen people.

It is from this intellectual legacy that Dohm likely drew his inspiration. He identifies the challenges and triumphs of Enlightenment, joining the ranks of thinkers like Lessing and Mendelssohn to argue that tolerance should be the movement’s primary goal. Both Dohm and

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<sup>16</sup> Allan Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994): xi.

<sup>17</sup> Arkush, xi.

<sup>18</sup> Ronald Schecter, introduction to *Nathan the Wise* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2004): 8.

<sup>19</sup> Schecter, 12.

Nassy were aware of European dialogue about Jewish rights and freedoms. Both men were outsiders (socially, politically, religiously, or otherwise), which meant that their contributions were potentially subject to more scrutiny but were also potentially more fruitful. Dohm contradicted much of the traditional European thought of this time (although he was very much in line with Mendelssohn and Lessing). Nassy, too, had radical ideas, but his outsider status came from his position as a religious minority in an outlying colony without extensive European contact. As insiders, Dohm and Nassy needed to define the conversations in which they were participating. As outsiders, they needed to prove themselves to be worthy of participating in this conversation. Toeing this line, both authors take great pains to define, critique, and praise Enlightenment throughout their works.

Christian Wilhelm von Dohm was, in many ways, primarily concerned with the concept of Enlightenment itself. His work is decidedly a product of the Enlightenment; he is very concerned with describing “our Enlightened times,” which he characterizes as both laudable and lacking in terms of their egalitarian goals.<sup>20</sup> Dohm is clear to distinguish the intolerant past from the semi-utopian present: “Like the rest of the European countries, the German states still show traces of the dark centuries in their constitutions regarding the Jews.”<sup>21</sup> This distinction between past and present, between darkness and light, is an essential part of his work. In reference to the Jews, he asks:

What might be the reasons that induced the governments of almost all European states almost unanimously to deal so harshly with the Jewish nation? What has induced them (even the wisest) to make this one exception from the laws of an otherwise enlightened policy according to which all citizens should be incited by uniform justice, support of

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<sup>20</sup> Christian Wilhelm von Dohm, *Concerning the Amelioration of the Civil Status of the Jews* (1781), translated by Helen Lederer (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 1957): 45.

<sup>21</sup> Dohm, 39.

trade, and the greatest possible freedom of action so as to contribute to the general welfare?<sup>22</sup>

In one breath, Dohm simultaneously praises and tears down Enlightenment governments, lauding their egalitarian policies and criticizing their treatment of Jews. He calls these states “wise,” but hints at the need for a complete overhaul of their socio-political systems. Dohm was conditioned to respect the Enlightenment as a positive departure from the dark past, but he still sees darkness in the present. Perhaps, according to Dohm, the problem was that Enlightenment had not entered far enough into the European psyche: “Portugal and Spain prove in this point, too, that enlightenment has not yet penetrated to any great extent to their lands. Holland has for a long time enriched itself by receiving the Jews expelled from these countries, who brought besides their own industry also considerable wealth.”<sup>23</sup> Referring to the idea that Enlightenment perhaps began with Jews, Dohm states that “it becomes very probable that there was a time when European Enlightenment was found mainly with the circumcised.”<sup>24</sup> This is high praise for the Jewish population, and serves to sow seeds of doubt in Enlightenment mindsets about the origins of the intellectual movement. Dohm’s critique of the Enlightenment, therefore, comes from his very real concern for the welfare, status, and equal treatment of the European Jewish population.

David de Isaac Cohen Nassy likely would have been keenly aware of this intellectual tradition; his critique of the Enlightenment begins at the opening of his introduction. In a very similar style to Dohm, Nassy’s work defines and characterizes the Enlightenment. The introduction to the *Essay* opens with a plea, a call for help, a statement about the sorry state of Jewish emancipation in Europe and its colonial outposts.<sup>25</sup> The authors of the *Essay* state that

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<sup>22</sup> Dohm, 5.

<sup>23</sup> Dohm, 40.

<sup>24</sup> Dohm, 31.

<sup>25</sup> Nassy, 15.

they have been wronged and therefore they need to set the record straight. Next, they state that, as long as they are critiquing European views on Judaism, it is only logical for them to offer their own insights on the challenge of integrating Jews into Christian Europe. The authors of the *Essay* have not been invited to enter this larger conversation; instead, they create their own opportunity to participate in Enlightenment discourse. By contrasting Europeans' intellectual prowess with their intolerance, the authors of the *Essay* begin a critique of Enlightenment views on Judaism with very little offense.

Of course, not all Enlightenment writers were as liberal or tolerant as Mendelssohn and Lessing. Christian Wilhelm von Dohm faced immense pressure from the Prussian community throughout the publication of his work. *Civil Amelioration* is a response to an earlier series of texts, written by Johann David Michaelis in 1770 through 1775: "as one of the Enlightenment's foremost authorities on – and admirers of – ancient Judaism, Michaelis also took an engaged role in the early debates on whether to grant contemporary Jews rights."<sup>26</sup> Michaelis and Dohm were locked in a heated debate about what should be done about Europe's substantial Jewish population. Dohm's publication date is, therefore, quite strategic: he is participating in a larger debate about Jewish liberties in Europe and around the world. Michaelis' argument focuses on improving the status of Jews by removing them from Europe. According to Jonathan Hess, "as a 'southern race' descended from the ancient Israelites, the Jewish Diaspora apparently need[ed] to be displaced once again, sent to a Caribbean climate analogous to its place of origin where Jews might become colonial subjects promoting the wealth of the European fatherland."<sup>27</sup> Dohm's argument, of course, is that Jews should remain in Europe and that Christians and political

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<sup>26</sup> Jonathan M. Hess, "Johann David Michaelis and the Colonial Imaginary: Orientalism and the Emergence of Racial Antisemitism in Eighteenth-Century Germany," *Jewish Social Studies* 6, no. 2 (2000): 57.

<sup>27</sup> Hess, 59.

authorities should make more of an effort to accept them as worthy citizens on the mainland. However, Hess makes it clear that Dohm and Michaelis have much more in common than it appears: “both perceive contemporary Jews as ‘degenerate,’ and both solve the Jewish problem by recourse to visions of colonial expansion, albeit very different ones.”<sup>28</sup> Michaelis and Dohm’s debate was at the center of emerging Enlightenment arguments about race, religion, and nationalism. Michaelis’ proposal to deport Jews to a European sugar colony fed directly into newfound ideas about Jews as a degenerate race.<sup>29</sup> Both authors sought to move Europe away from its past: Michaelis wanted to allow Christian Europe to move beyond Judaism by removing Jews from the continent, while Dohm sought to improve Jewish living conditions by giving Jews the opportunity to participate in the traditional agricultural and crafts traditions of rural Europe.

Nassy, too, fights his own intolerant demons. He opens the *Essay* with an attack on Voltaire, blaming him for general European prejudices against the Jewish community: “This great man, meant to enlighten the world, in the midst of his digressions against religions, preaching tolerance, trampling all cults under foot, conjointly took unfortunate pleasure in crushing the Jewish community and making it hideous in the eyes of the world.”<sup>30</sup> If nothing else, this striking opening statement is an incredibly effective way to get attention. Voltaire was a prominent member of the European intellectual community, and criticism of him was very much in vogue. Adam Sutcliffe characterizes the difficulty of Voltaire’s intellectual stance when it came to Judaism: “Voltaire’s judaeophobia is repeatedly off-set by his commitment to universal tolerance – and vice versa. Individual Jews, as Jews, are hopelessly immersed in a culture of absurdity, but, as individuals, they are both entitled to toleration and deserving of sympathy for

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<sup>28</sup> Hess, 59.

<sup>29</sup> Hess, 88.

<sup>30</sup> Nassy, 15.

their suffering.”<sup>31</sup> Voltaire’s main critique of Judaism came from the religion’s reliance on the Old Testament, a document that he sought to dismiss as an absurd fairy tale. Jonathan Hess describes a “theological antagonism toward Judaism” which was a key element of Enlightenment fears and concerns about the religion, and Voltaire seems to play directly into this prejudice.<sup>32</sup> Voltaire’s problem with Jews and Jewishness, then, stems from his distrust for organized religion. However, he seems to critique Judaism particularly harshly, potentially because he came from a cultural context in which disparaging Judaism was in vogue or at least normalized. This cultural context was rife with opportunities for critique, and Nassy and the Regenten leaped at the opportunity to argue against Voltaire.

### **Diaspora**

Both authors exist at a distinct turning point in the Jewish historical narrative. This narrative is a nomadic one – with voluntary and forced movements all over the world – rather than one that is specifically centered around a single homeland. “The basic social unit of the Diaspora,” according to Sophia Menache, “was the community (kehillah).”<sup>33</sup> This social unit was recognized by secular governments, giving Jews special rights and privileges as members of a community within a larger society. Unfortunately, this community structure often relegated Jews to the status of second-class citizens because they were differentiated as the “other” in largely Christian societies. Jews had comparatively high literacy rates and were likely to own books, giving them the vocabulary with which to communicate within and between communities and with outsiders. Perhaps the most powerful way in which Jews participated in the larger world

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<sup>31</sup> Adam Sutcliffe, “The Ambiguities of Enlightenment: Voltaire and the Jews,” in *Judaism and Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 243.

<sup>32</sup> Hess, 57.

<sup>33</sup> Sophia Menache, “Communication in the Jewish Diaspora: A Survey,” *Communication in the Jewish Diaspora* ed. Sophia Menache (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996): 15.

was through trade, becoming increasingly wealthy economic agents by using their established connections with Jewish communities around the world to create trading routes.<sup>34</sup>

What we consider to be the Diaspora had largely ended by the eighteenth century. Jews remained marginal citizens, migrating through the Atlantic and around Europe in search of political and religious acceptance. They found this acceptance, to varying degrees, in the Dutch Republic. The Dutch valued Jewish business acumen and tended to be much more religiously tolerant than many other European powers. By the seventeenth century, Jews had moved to Dutch New World colonies by the thousands, establishing themselves as traders and cultural brokers. The Dutch colony of Suriname is somewhat of an outlier; Jews moved there first to start an agricultural colony, and for over 100 years they thrived on cash crops of sugar cane and coffee. By the late eighteenth century, however, the plantation culture of Suriname declined, and more and more Jews lived in the port town of Paramaribo.<sup>35</sup> These Jews were of Portuguese heritage, having moved from the Iberian Peninsula to Brazil to Amsterdam and through multiple Atlantic colonies before settling in Suriname. By the late eighteenth century, the majority of the Jewish community in Suriname had been born there and had never traveled outside of the colony. Despite the relative permanence of Jewish settlement in Suriname, this community was decidedly Atlantic, interacting with its Dutch benefactors and other communities around the ocean through communication, travel, and trade.

David de Isaac Cohen Nassy and the Regenten came out of this historical tradition, giving their views on the future of Judaism a very different color than Dohm's. Unquestionably members of the Jewish diaspora, the Regenten did not have the typical life experiences of most

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<sup>34</sup> Menache, 48.

<sup>35</sup> Jonathan I. Israel, "The Jews of Dutch America," *The Jews and the Expansion of Europe to the West, 1500-1800*, ed. Paolo Bernardini and Norman Fiering (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001): 336.

European thinkers, meaning that a portion of their outsider status was attributable to their history. While the majority of Nassy's text is dedicated to the historical study of the Jews in Suriname, the preface and introduction provide a compelling call to action for European governments to accept Jews as a valuable group of citizens, economic agents, and cultural brokers. The *Essay* is meant to "contribute to some extent to the welfare of a suffering part of the human race" by characterizing the Jewish colonial experience.<sup>36</sup> The Regenten desired a level of political and social freedom that was not yet afforded to them by the Dutch Republic: "we have demonstrated, with all the force of which we are capable, the rights of our colonists in general, and the protection which they rightfully claim and await in accordance with the justice and equity of their mother country and the merchants of Holland..."<sup>37</sup> The Jews of Suriname do not propose a plan of action like Dohm's; they do not even outline specific political or social changes that must take place in order for Jews to have a sustainable European future. Instead, they use nebulous terms like "freedom" to loosely define their desires for an ideal Dutch Republic. On one hand, this makes sense. The *Essay* is primarily an informational work, meant to argue that Jews deserve a much more prominent place in Suriname's historical narrative. The *Essay* is concerned with sharing Jewish life as it is, not necessarily making concrete arguments as to how it can be improved. The Regenten existed in a very specific socio-political sphere, delicately balancing their status as tenuous colonial citizens with their status as religious outsiders. This balancing act was, in many ways, a direct product of their status as Atlantic Jews.

An outsider to the Jewish experience but an insider as it related to Enlightenment views on history, Dohm deals with the diaspora with more temporal depth. He goes all the way back to

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<sup>36</sup> Nassy, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Nassy, 9.

ancient Egypt and Rome in order to characterize the Jewish experience.<sup>38</sup> In fact, Dohm applauds the treatment that Jews received under Roman rule and states that the rise of Christianity is to blame for the Jews' downfall: "the Jews would have stayed more enlightened and less corrupt had not fanatic church fathers later talked weak emperors into abolishing the wise laws of their predecessors, and to prove their zeal for the religion of love by treating non-Christians without charity."<sup>39</sup> Dohm's preoccupation with the past is difficult to understand. A plausible explanation is that Dohm sought an example, a yardstick by which to measure the progress of the treatment of Jews. Seeing no such comparative case in contemporary society, Dohm turned to the deep past. Dohm's characterization of the Jews as members of a diaspora further supports his beliefs about the sources of prejudice against them: "the dispersal of the nation over almost all parts of the known world, the close connection of their various groups, and their greater culture and knowledge, gave them advantages in commerce against the ruling peoples of Christian Europe..."<sup>40</sup> Thus, in Dohm's eyes, jealousy and economic competition drove Christians to dislike and attempt to take advantage of Jews. For Dohm (and to a lesser extent for Nassy), the diaspora contributed in a significant way to the contemporary Jewish experience, specifically as it related to mistreatment by non-Jews.

### **Mistreatment of the Jews**

Christian Wilhelm von Dohm's work is, at its core, a text that argues wholeheartedly and thoroughly for Jewish emancipation through analysis of the mistreatment of the contemporary Jewish population. Dohm refers to Jews as "unfortunate Asiatic refugees," a cultural group that has long suffered at the hands of Christians.<sup>41</sup> He spends much of his work describing and

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<sup>38</sup> Dohm, 23.

<sup>39</sup> Dohm, 25.

<sup>40</sup> Dohm, 31.

<sup>41</sup> Dohm, 1.

critiquing this reprehensible treatment of Jews, calling for widespread reform and reconsideration of the position of Jews in society. He describes “this unfortunate, who has no fatherland, whose activity is restricted on all sides, whose talents have no scope for free utterance, in whose virtue nobody believes, for whom honor is almost non-existent...”<sup>42</sup> Dohm’s language aligns with Enlightenment conversations, as demonstrated by Moses Mendelssohn’s writings, and it views the Jews as a pitiable group rather than one that deserves to be antagonized. His harsh words about the treatment of Jews play directly into his plans for the future of Judaism in Europe.

Dohm also focuses on what it is to be Jewish – in this regard, of course, he is an outsider. Raised Christian and eventually adopting deist beliefs, Dohm was hardly an internal representative of the Jewish community. He describes the Jewish experience from Roman times to the present day, mentioning “fanatical religious hatred” as a key element of this experience.<sup>43</sup> He decries the treatment of Jews in specific terms: “never has any nation had to suffer such cruel and inhuman persecutions for such a long period of time. If there was any natural catastrophe it was assumed that the Jews were the unfortunate cause that had angered heaven and that their extermination would reconcile God.”<sup>44</sup> With this poor treatment, how could Jews possibly be expected to participate fully and effectively in society? Dohm’s critique is, surprisingly, more biting than that of Nassy and the Regenten. Did Dohm have more freedom to speak openly about the Jewish experience as a non-Jew? The Regenten were likely wary to offer such harsh criticisms of their experiences because they remained at the mercy of the Dutch Republic, whose policies could change at a moment’s notice.

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<sup>42</sup> Dohm, 3.

<sup>43</sup> Dohm, 22.

<sup>44</sup> Dohm, 34.

In the *Essay*, the Regenten are careful to avoid harsh criticisms of their colonial leaders and other European powers. They spend the vast majority of the book presenting past events with very little interpretation or analysis. How is it possible, then, to characterize their work as one that argues for Jewish emancipation? The work does contain powerful statements about the potential for the improvement of the Jewish condition, which come at the beginning and end of the *Essay*. These serve as bookends and framing information for a work that, without these introductory and concluding comments, would be very different. At the beginning of the *Essay*, Nassy states, "...without fearing criticism, we have ventured to compose this work, the result of which and the consequences which may derive from it will perhaps contribute to some extent to the welfare of a suffering part of the human race."<sup>45</sup> This statement leads the reader directly into the first pages of the first section of the *Essay*, demonstrating that what could be an innocuous and wholly descriptive historical text is actually meant to serve as the basis for changes in the treatment of Jews in Europe and the Atlantic. In the last paragraph of the book, the Regenten write, "...if this work, despite its faults, is worthy of attracting the attention of the public and of effecting in some manner a change favorable to a community that has been unfortunate for so many centuries, then we shall consider ourselves happy."<sup>46</sup> Certainly, the goal is understated. But its placement in the book's final paragraph could not be more strategic. This reimagining of colonial history can effect change on a global scale, and the Regenten are sure to emphasize it.

In the *Essay*, what it is to be Jewish stems from extensive cultural and community connections. The extensive historical context that the Regenten provide in the *Essay* suggests that something of what it is to be Jewish in Suriname is to be aware of history, celebrating the community's triumphs and learning from its failures. The most intriguing elements of Nassy's

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<sup>45</sup> Nassy, 5.

<sup>46</sup> Nassy, 168.

depiction of the Jewish experience are presented in the second half of the *Essay*, where the Regenten describe contemporary life in Suriname. They bemoan the lack of intellectual life in the colony, claiming that the educational system has not equipped the colonial population with the tools that they need to succeed globally.<sup>47</sup> However, they also describe the extensive libraries and book collections in the colony, all of which are owned or managed by Jews. Therefore, at least according to the Regenten, to be Jewish is to be an intellectual leader with historical awareness and cultural acumen. Unfortunately, the Regenten also recognize that an enormous part of what it means to be Jewish in eighteenth-century Suriname is to experience prejudice and discrimination.

### **Fixing the Problem of Prejudice**

Both authors seek to explore the future of Judaism in the enlightened world, characterizing their expectations for religious freedom and tolerance. Both are outsiders, arguing against the status quo for more equal treatment for Jews. Dohm's argument is one of political inclusion. His work is peppered with utopian comments, but his idealism for the future of European Jews becomes most prominent in the last pages of his work. He lays out a set of nine points that he sees as essential in making "Jews more useful and happier members of society."<sup>48</sup>

His basic points are outlined here:

1. Jews must have "equal rights with all other subjects."<sup>49</sup>
2. Jews should be encouraged to pursue all economic outlets, and should potentially be discouraged from trade, at least at first.
3. Jews should be encouraged to go into agriculture.
4. Jews should not have a complete monopoly over one specific area of the market.
5. Jews must seek the highest possible levels of education.
6. The state should take responsibility for educating the Jewish population.
7. Christians should be re-educated so as to eliminate all of their prejudices against Jews.

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<sup>47</sup> Nassy, 163.

<sup>48</sup> Dohm, 60.

<sup>49</sup> Dohm, 60.

8. Jews must be allowed to worship and build synagogues freely.
9. Jews must be allowed to govern themselves according to ancient Jewish laws.

In Enlightenment eyes, these tenets provided a very clear road map for a potential solution to the problem of Jews in Europe. Much like Mendelssohn and many other authors of this time, Dohm argued for assimilation and re-education. Perhaps in true Enlightenment fashion, these tenets revolve around the liberties that are afforded to marginalized populations through education and following complex legal codes. His nine tenets are meant to provide a basic outline for a national constitution meant to include Jews as newly minted citizens.

It is in this realm that Dohm's most powerful argument emerges. He describes what it is to be a citizen "in our lands," characterizing the European continent as a united entity despite national differences.<sup>50</sup> He is concerned with questions of liberty and equality, stating that to be a citizen is to be free. The issue of citizenship arises on the first page of his text: "in most...states the Jews were received under most cumbersome conditions, not as citizens, but as inhabitants and subjects only."<sup>51</sup> This impactful language would have resonated with thinkers who were considering national identity in a new light. It would especially have resonated with Jews (like Nassy) who were describing themselves as existing outside of national identities. Within the European political system, "the Jew, too, is entitled to this privilege [of full citizenship], to this love."<sup>52</sup> This language of citizenship and acceptance would have been very appealing to Jews of this era, who traced their history back centuries but who were also products of a very recent diasporic movement out of the Iberian peninsula. Dohm uses Christian Europe as the standard by which to judge other cultures, an ideal that fit into other Enlightenment conversations about cultural and social change. Suriname was exotic – a new, rarely discussed place where this

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<sup>50</sup> Dohm, 45.

<sup>51</sup> Dohm, 1.

<sup>52</sup> Dohm, 45.

cultural group he so supported had found peace. In addition, Surinamese history provided a direct parallel for Dohm's desires for Jewish life: "I do not wish to see the Jews encouraged to become owners of big estates or tenants," he says, "but peasants working their own land."<sup>53</sup> In Joden Savanne, the parents and grandparents of the Regenten had formed an agricultural system that met many of Dohm's requirements for an ideal Jewish community.

As descendants of those who created Dohm's semi-utopian Jewish community, the Regenten argue for socio-cultural inclusion. They address this history of forced movement with a series of pointed questions:

Does not policy at all prescribe that the Jews of Surinam are to be regarded with more favorable eyes? Do not Jews, rich or poor, always remain in the places in which they have once settled? Does not the contrary happen every day with individuals of other groups?...How many examples of this nature could be cited on this subject in order to prove incontestably that it is only the Jews who are indeed the true citizens and inhabitants of Suriname?<sup>54</sup>

Nassy and the Regenten make it clear that Jews can form permanent settlements if they are allowed to do so, thereby addressing the diaspora and arguing that the Jews are in Suriname to stay. This series of questions rings true with the rest of the text. In general, Nassy simply wants his community to be recognized as a significant contributor to colonial life, especially socially. He states, "the Jews have made, as we have already proved in numerous passages of this work, the same progress in Surinam as the Christians; they were as rich there, and as good planters as the Christians, and, like them, they have become impoverished."<sup>55</sup> Christians and Jews, then, experienced similar hardships in Suriname – and they should be treated equally in the world at large. The Regenten even mention Jewish participation in military history, leveraging their sacrifices in war as evidence for their need to be included as equals in European society.

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<sup>53</sup> Dohm, 63.

<sup>54</sup> Nassy, 108.

<sup>55</sup> Nassy, 100.

However, the argument remains social. The Regenten do not recommend specific political moves for the Dutch government, nor do they seem to be actively soliciting structural change. They clearly want to be thought of as social equals in the colonial community. But inquiring minds still need to know: is that really all they want?

The text does provide a legal argument, albeit in a much subtler manner than Dohm's. The *Essay* describes (in limited detail) the legal maneuvers that were necessary for David Nassy to establish the Jewish colony in Suriname, characterizing the various Dutch governors of the colony and describing the Jewish leaders (especially David and Samuel Nassy) who orchestrated agreements between the Dutch and the Jews.<sup>56</sup> This rather unspecific treatment of legal issues is characteristic of the *Essay*. But midway through the appendix, included without comment from the authors, is a section titled "Justificatory Documents for the Clarification of the Work with Reference to the History of the Jewish Community Established in Surinam."<sup>57</sup> Here, the Regenten have published the full text of the charter between the elder Nassy and the Dutch West India Company establishing the colony in Cayenne. The reader can peruse countless letters detailing legal battles between Paramaribo and Amsterdam, dealing with issues such as marriage laws, land disputes, property rights, religious authority, and military action. The documents speak volumes about the logistical and legal red tape surrounding Jewish existence in Suriname, offering examples for Dohm as he encouraged his fellow Prussians to engage in these same legal struggles. In these letters, the Jews write candidly about their synagogues, community relationships, and material possessions. They offer criticisms and ask directly for policy changes. Though the main text of the *Essay* itself remains non-confrontational, the appendix provides evidence for the solidly activist approach that the Regenten and their predecessors took to

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<sup>56</sup> Nassy, 39.

<sup>57</sup> Nassy, 183.

effecting colonial change. Nassy includes these documents, then, as a silent commentary on Dohm's explicit statements about the necessity of specific legal reconfigurations.

### **An Atlantic Jewish Republic of Letters?**

This project raises questions about the realities of the particular world in which Nassy and Dohm lived. The primary (and perhaps most contested) of these is the idea of an Atlantic Jewish republic of letters – that is, a network of written communication spanning an increasingly interconnected oceanic sphere. This is a topic for another researcher – but it is one worth mentioning. This idea of a republic of letters is familiar to Enlightenment scholars, but broadening the republic to include the non-European community might cause discomfort. Despite apparent reluctance to expand the traditional definition of the republic of letters, it is quite logical to place Nassy and his colonial contemporaries in this network of verbose communication. We can complicate this concept further by introducing the relatively new field of Jewish Atlantic studies into the equation. In the Jewish Atlantic, how did information travel? What was the nature of communication? Was Judaism a defining factor in how these conversations were conducted? Arthur Kiron is quick to establish the existence of networks of Jews in the Atlantic from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries: “the relationships that emerged were constantly in motion, a fluid circulation of people and ideas, business and news.”<sup>58</sup> Kiron argues for the existence of “a contemporary self-consciousness” in the mid-nineteenth century, at which point Jews in the Atlantic were aware of their existence within larger networks.<sup>59</sup> Dohm and Nassy were active participants in this “conscious cultural project constituted by a network of opinion makers, information providers, authors, and translators who exploited the agency of print

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<sup>58</sup> Arthur Kiron, “An Atlantic Jewish Republic of Letters,” *Jewish History* 20 (2006): 171.

<sup>59</sup> Kiron, 174.

both for positive and apologetic purposes.”<sup>60</sup> Based on their depictions of the Jewish past and present, their characterizations of the Enlightenment, and their hopes for the future of Judaism in Europe, it is clear that Dohm and Nassy were strategic and prolific members of an Atlantic Jewish republic of letters, using the network to their advantage in order to gain access to a potentially more prominent European conversation.

It is clear, at least to this historian, that Nassy’s work represents a significant contribution and response to the Enlightenment. With strategy, poise, and a command of discursive practices, the Regenten and Dohm were able to contribute meaningfully to the Enlightenment from its periphery. Although Nassy and the Regenten often bemoaned a lack of literary intellectual life within Suriname’s borders, their *Essay* represented a significant contribution to a much larger, more impactful Atlantic and European conversation.

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<sup>60</sup> Kiron, 176.

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