On the Borders of Europe:

Zionism and (Post) Colonialism in Memmi and Levinas

*To the PR workshop:* this paper will serve as my orals paper during my upcoming exams. In addition, I hope to continue thinking with some of the questions and issues it raises, especially as I begin trying to craft a dissertation proposal. To that end, in addition to more specific questions, I would also appreciate more general questions as they relate to broader themes, figures, and trajectories and any advice you might have on the most productive ways to move forward.

# Introduction

In 1961, as the rallying cries of Algerian independence were reaching their fever pitch, Emmanuel Levinas wrote an essay for the Jewish monthly *L’arche*. The piece was entitled “Jewish Thought Today,” and in it Levinas outlined what he saw as the predicaments facing Jewish philosophy. Three events, he thinks, had largely shaped its past and would in many ways determine its future:

1. The unique experience of the revival of anti-Semitism, which culminated in the scientific extermination of a third of all Jews by National Socialism.
2. The Zionist aspirations which culminated in the creation of the State of Israel.
3. The arrival on the historical scene of those underdeveloped Afro-Asiatic masses who are strangers to the Sacred History that forms the heart of the Judaic-Christian world.[[1]](#footnote-1)

For a thinker who—much to the ire of his many commentators—had very little to say on decolonization, the quote is particularly generative. Not because it offers a programatic statement on Levinas’s thoughts on colonialism and decolonization, far from it. Rather because it brings into view, in one broad stroke, the intertwined histories of antisemitism, Zionism, *and* colonialism—all painted against the backdrop of Europe, or what has somehow become a “Judaic-Christian world.” The quote is of course troublesome in more ways than one, and one cannot but worry about the racist valence of Levinas’s description of “underdeveloped Afro-Asiatic masses”—which, tellingly, he sets apart from Judaism and Christianity. Moreover, for someone who had done so much to accord a unique position to Judaism over and against Western philosophy, how is it that Levinas reverses course here and intimately aligns a Judaic-Christian Sacred History?

Much of this essay will consist of asking about such reversals. Aside from considering how or why they happened, I want to ask what they tell us about a larger question that beset Levinas and others like him: How to theorize the position of Jewish difference in relation to the West and its others. On the one hand, Levinas’s reversal bespeaks a long history of attempting to synthesize Judaism and the West. On the other hand, it also indicates a marked anxiety about the contemporary relevance of Judaism and the desire on Levinas’s part to ensure its continuity. Faced with the ambiguous question of Judaism’s position, Levinas attempts to shore up its boundaries and alliances, at the expense, of course, of denigrating others. What most interests me is precisely that ambiguous position Judaism embodies and the various bonds, reversals, turns, and indeterminacies that continue to plague it.

## Postcolonialism and Jewishness in Question

Within the last ten years, a growing chorus of scholars have advocated for the necessity of considering the Jewish condition within our larger frameworks of colonialism and postcolonialism.[[2]](#footnote-2) At stake in such pairings, in the words of one special issue recently devoted to the subject, is to reimagine a “critical reciprocity” between the two fields.[[3]](#footnote-3) Such a reciprocity would traverse beyond the status of victimization or homogenous notions of alterity, and instead illuminate overlapping if sometimes contradictory experiences of oppression and difference. Thus, the editors of the issue note how

historically then the Jewish experience in modernity can be said to have provided fertile templates for understanding questions as varied as minoritarianism, diaspora, nostalgia, racialization, ethnicity, cultural difference, linguistic creolization, hybridity, and colonialism, all of which are central concerns in postcolonial studies.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Across the pages of journal articles, special issues, books, interviews, and conferences—the entire academic apparatus in other words—one can track the steady emergence of this field together with its attendant dilemmas. A few of these challenges interest me here. The first concerns what we’ll call the question of allegory, and the second bears, perhaps predictably, on Israel-Palestine and the question of Zionism.

My initial gambit then is this: first, while the concerns and questions of these scholars promise to expand the horizons of the field, they often rely upon unsustainable and problematic notions of Jewish identity and difference. The desire for Judaism to maintain a certain symbolic priority, for instance, leads to a binary construction of Jews and others—despite all protestations to the contrary. Second, though Israel-Palestine quickly becomes a lightning rod for these debates, igniting and dividing its interlocutors, the position of Zionism within the broader frameworks for understanding Judaism and postcolonialism remains largely under-theorized. Thus, bearing all this in mind, my readings of Memmi and Levinas will focus on bringing into consideration the whole range of questions opened by these debates and showing how a close attention to the seeming reversals in their thought proves fertile ground for exploring some of the tensions.

The problem of allegorization afflicts a recent article by Bryan Cheyette, “Against Supersessionist Thinking: Old and New, Jews and Postcolonialism, the Ghetto and Diaspora.” In a nutshell, Cheyette argues that postcolonial literature tends to cast Jews as ‘old’ and ‘past’ in need of the ‘new.’ Such thinking engages in a secularized form of supersessionism by allegorizing the figure of the Jew, thereby depriving them of lived reality—or so goes the claim. In his words: such thinking “enacts the struggle between ‘old’ and ‘new’ where the Jewish or Judaized father-figure is killed off or disempowered so as to enable the postcolonial voice to be heard.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Cheyette here cements a claim he had already made in his book, *Diasporas of the Mind,* in which he had a similar concern: the aestheticization of certain parts of Jewish life and culture, especially the diaspora. In his account, aestheticization or allegorization risks casting Judaism as simply “another great tradition,” and evacuates it of historical and political reality.[[6]](#footnote-6) Jews become *merely* symbolic, emptied out of any real existence, and quickly cast off in favor of the new.

It is certainly illuminating that Cheyette’s concerns closely mimic another moment in the field when diaspora was being theorized across disciplinary borders. In 1993, Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin published their highly influential essay “Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity.” They too argued in perfect counterpoint against the “allegorization of *Jew.”*[[7]](#footnote-7) At the time, their immediate target was Jean-François Lyotard’s book *Heidegger and “the jews,”* which, they claimed, “allegorized away real, uppercase Jews.”[[8]](#footnote-8) By rendering “the jews” in lowercase, Lyotard participated in a longstanding tradition of depriving Jews of their reality, a tradition, they argue, that reaches back to Paul and the early supersession of Judaism. In their words, “once Paul succeeded, ‘real Jews’ ended up being only a trope. They have remained such for European discourse down to the present.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

As is the case for Cheyette (and so too Levinas for that matter), the Boyarins evince a deep-seated anxiety about the continued and contemporary relevance of Judaism to serve as a model for thinking questions of difference and alterity. Moreover, their concern with allegorization constructs a binary conception of identity largely predicated on an either/or model. As Sarah Hammerschlag argues, these positions are illustrative for

they expose the belief that there are only two options of identity expression available: one that is universalist and one that is particularist. The Jew can either become an allegory and, thus, the object of a supersessionist move of some sort or vigilantly maintain the distinction of Jewish particularity by establishing a cipher that separates those who are authorized to speak for, about, or in the name of Jews from those who are not.[[10]](#footnote-10)

These sorts of claims inevitably seek to shore up a conception of Jewish identity over and against anyone who may deign to think with or alongside it—and this despise all stated claims to the contrary. The fact that Cheyette doubles down on the same concern merely situates him in a long line of similarly problematic thinkers. The insistence on Jewish particularity and the fear of all forms of allegorization repeats the bifurcated, restricted models of identity they seek to overcome.

While the work of Santiago Slabodsky attempts to eclipse the postcolonial framework in favor of a decolonial one, it too suffers from a similar polarized model.[[11]](#footnote-11) A decolonial Judaism, for Slabodsky, would entail a re-appropriation of the term “barbarism,” wrenching it from its pejorative, accusative connotations and translating it into a productive and counter-hegemonic category. Slabodsky is quick to note how in the post-Holocaust period Jews no longer assumed the position of the West’s barbaric other. His question then, is can Jewish thought still prove a fertile ground for “barbaric thinking?” And if so, might this allow for points of solidarity and association with other Global South theorists and communities? However, even as he seeks to undermine the hegemony of Western political thinking, his thought remains entangled in and contingent upon the very structures it attempts to criticize. The result is a highly demarcated and ossified identity politics that—in a similar manner to what we just saw, perhaps even more explicitly—only allows for a Western/non-Western approach. Who and when one can inhabit the Western or decolonial/barbaric paradigms winds up depending on a reductive and polarized version of association and belonging. The terms North/South, East/West, insider/outsider, minority/majority can, ultimately, do no more than signify a space devoid of any meaning or power. They fail, in other words, to conceive of any other more liminal space, one that might crisscross or engage productively between each of the two proposed sides.

By way of contrast to these and other similar forms of thinking, what will concern us here is precisely those sites where the figure of the Jew tracks between and across these binary forms of identity. It is in those moments of disorientation that reveal the instability of all such binary approaches, including those that seem to continue to dominate the field. How do we get beyond the parts and whole logic that dominates theories of insider/outsider, minority/majority, universal/particular? The insistence to pit one against the other fails to account for the fluctuations, reversals, borrowings, hybdridities, and positions of closeness and distance that constitute such relationships.

Cheyette’s essay was in large part incited by an interview with Aamir Mufti in the special issue mentioned above dedicated to postcolonialism and Jewish studies.[[12]](#footnote-12) Mufti is commenting on the relevance of his conceptual model developed in *Enlightenment in the Colony* for talking about Israel-Palestine. He appeals explicitly to scholars in Jewish Studies to “extend those critical insights to Israel and the Palestinians themselves in a clear and unsentimental assessment of who are the fascists and who constitutes the vulnerable and brutalized population.”[[13]](#footnote-13) These comments—to my mind relatively uncontroversial—ignite a sprawling debate between Cheyette, Michael Rothberg and others that concerns, amongst other things, policing the purportedly “unthinking” political discourse in the academy, especially and primarily as it concerns Israel-Palestine.[[14]](#footnote-14) However, I think the minutiae of the debate are less revealing than what it tells us about the predicaments of this nascent field and the dogged questions that follow it.

What I want to suggest is that what remains under-theorized in these discussions, and what occasionally reduces them to political squabbles, is precisely what Mufti alludes to when he notes how the State of Israel has a remarkable ability to turn victims into perpetrators. A “horrific dialectical reversal” has taken place, he says.[[15]](#footnote-15) From being the prototypical minority figure to being deeply embedded within the structures of Western power and domination, the figure of the Jew undergoes a radical reversal, for which Zionism is its crown achievement. What must be understood, I think, are the processes, conditions, and political and philosophical projects that enabled this shift, and what role the intertwined histories of antisemitism, Zionism, and colonialism played in this regard. However, rather than reducing the conversation to a debate over whether or not Zionism is colonialist or not, I intend to think about it within a broader set of conversations and questions that concern this very question of reversal and return.[[16]](#footnote-16)

That Zionism, paradoxically, remains under-theorized is evident in Michael Rothberg’s highly lauded book *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization.* Rothberg argues against understanding memory as a competitive, zero sum game, and highlights instead those sites wherein memories of the Holocaust and colonialism can illuminate rather than occlude each other.[[17]](#footnote-17) One groups’ memory need not ‘win out’ against another’s. However, throughout his many enlightening examples, Rothberg never considers how Zionism might disrupt, reorganize, or otherwise play a role in this history. Instead, he includes it in a brief appendage, added almost as an afterthought to the end of the book. What problems might Zionism pose for a multidirectional framework—especially for decolonial thinkers and activists for whom Zionism was in many ways a continuation of European colonialism? In what ways was it seen as part of larger question concerning Jewish associations with Europe and colonialism?

To take but one final example that seems to be gaining traction amongst scholars, let us briefly consider the work of Enzo Traverso. On the surface, Traverso seems to stage precisely the question of reversal: How is it, he wants to know, that Jews went from being revolutionary, dissident voices to being in direct harmonious counterpoint with the West?[[18]](#footnote-18) Traverso marshals a series of figures by which he attempts to illustrate his point: Karl Marx, Leon Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Sigmund Freud, and Franz Kafka on the dissident side, Leo Strauss, Henry Kissinger, and Ariel Sharon on the other. However, Traverso too participates in and engages with a whole series of essentialized binaries that ought to be deconstructed—“Judaism” and the “West” are but the most prominent example. Rather than exposing the genealogical production of these categories themselves, his study in many ways serves to shore them up. If Jewish thought promises a counter-hegemonic site of resistance to Western dominance, it will take a more careful analysis of the construction, separation, assimilation, and perpetuation of this dominance in order to understand how Judaism could so quickly wind up replicating those very same structures of powers.

# Jews and Europe

What makes Albert Memmi and Emmanuel Levinas such interesting case studies is the way they seem to track seamlessly back and forth between the two poles—in and of, but perhaps not quite a part of Europe. They prove compelling figures by which to explore the dynamics which we began describing above. Accordingly, though I will highlight their respective relationships to Zionism and colonialism, I’m much less interested in adjudicating their positions than in tracing those positions back to a set of broader questions. How is it that they arrived at the Zionist cause? What web of associations and disassociations did that entail? In what ways did their very theorization of the figure of the Jew, in its ambivalent relation to Europe and the West, get caught up in those reversals? Both thinkers betray a striking affinity for diagnosing and criticizing the ills of modern Western society—whether it be Memmi’s diagnosis of the always asymmetrical nature of the colonial relationship or Levinas’s criticisms of the Western philosophical preoccupation with Being at the expense of ethics. Yet, oftentimes in the same breath and using the same philosophical-critical vocabulary, they wind up supporting the State of Israel and justifying a slew of rather unsatisfactory positions. Such is the dynamic I want to explore here.

This doubled position vexes many readers of Memmi and Levinas. Looking at Memmi’s oeuvre for example, scholars point to its seemingly conflicting nature: first he publishes an anticolonial classic, *The Colonizer and the Colonized,* a book read in conjunction with Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire and other postcolonial theorists; and only a few years later, with the publication of *Portrait of a Jew* and then *The Liberation of the Jew,* Memmi’s commits himself to political Zionism, a position seemingly antithetical to his earlier one. If, as one commentator puts it, “it is as if there were two Memmis,”[[19]](#footnote-19) how then, do we read them together?

Levinas too receives a similar treatment. Over the last decade or so a self-proclaimed third wave has emerged in Levinas Studies. This conversation seeks to situate Levinas within a broader, transnational context and to employ his thought in a broader sociopolitical arena. As the recently edited volume, *Radicalizing Levinas,* makes clear, scholars are expanding Levinas’s ideas and applying them to a broad range of topics including the Israel-Palestine conflict, postcolonialism, animal studies, ecology, and technology.[[20]](#footnote-20) As the editors note, this wave of Levinas scholarship seeks to advance past textual explication and offers a renewed critical engagement with topics that may very well exceed the contours of Levinas’s writings. John E. Drabinski makes a similar point in his book *Levinas and the Postcolonial,* where he notes that postcolonial thinkers have all but ignored Levinas and refused to give his thought serious engagement. Putting the two in conversation, he argues, will not simply make Levinas a “postcolonial thinker” but may spark a fruitful dialogue that illuminates both tensions and points of overlap, to the mutual benefit of both. “The aim,” he says,

is neither to reinvent Levinas as a postcolonial thinker nor simply to critique his work as Eurocentric. Rather Levinas’s work needs to be creatively reread across geographies—literal and ﬁgurative—in order to think more rigorously about the question of the Other as an *ethical,* *cultural,* and *political* question.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Most pertinent to my concerns here, is a recurring concern that traverses many of these texts: the question of Levinas’s thoroughgoing Eurocentrism. The issue threatens to disrupt a transnational and decolonial Levinas—and not without good reason. Levinas has made some highly questionable and overtly xenophobic comments about non-Western cultures that would indicate at the very least a sense of European elitism. Thus scholars diagnose an aporetic relationship between what Levinas’s philosophy seems to offer and where it ends up. The response, by and large, is either to divide and separate (salvage the ‘good,’ dismiss the ‘bad’) or to indict (and perhaps read against).

By way of contrast, I want to suggest that precisely this dissonance illustrates a larger dynamic that concerns the figure of the Jew—and I think this key factor is entirely missed or unthought in these conversations. Specifically, I want to suggest that Levinas’s—and Memmi’s for that matter—relationship to “Europe” (let us scare-quote this for a moment) cannot be seen apart from his engagement with it in and through Judaism. In other words, it’s never simply a matter of asking about Europe—homogenous, white, mostly Christian, probably male—but seeing how that relationship is constructed in and through his careful positioning of Judaism. What must concern us is Europe in relation to Jews and the Jewish Question, and vice versa, Jews and their complex relationship to Europe. I think emphasizing the assembled nature of Europe highlights how it cannot be simply seen as a binary relationship that pits an “us” versus a “them.” Europe itself becomes a hotly contested site of critical engagement and negotiation, particularly (at least in Levinas’s case) with the Jewish tradition.

That this point goes entirely unnoticed by scholars is evident in how Levinas’s Eurocentrism is “proven.” Robert Eaglestone, for instance, cherry-picks a number of choice quotations which are cited as evidence for the issue.[[22]](#footnote-22) Which is not to say that the quotes aren’t troubling or racially charged. When Levinas says, for instance: “I often say, although it is a dangerous thing to say publicly, that humanity consists of the Bible and Greeks. All the rest can be translated: all the rest—all the exotic—is dance.”[[23]](#footnote-23) one should certainly be unflinching in criticizing him. Nonetheless, I think his relationship to the Greeks or to Europe is a much more complicated one that a straightforward Eurocentrism. Drabinski is equally illuminating. He raises the question of how Levinas’s Jewish and philosophical sources work together (something frequently commented upon), and argues:

it is worth noting in this context that if one argues for a religious foundation to Levinas’s work, then that only intensiﬁes the imperative to decolonize his work. For religion is part of how cultural hegemony is articulated; perhaps only second to language, the religious structures and destructures in ways we cannot but see as chauvinistic, even just plainly violent, in a transnational context.[[24]](#footnote-24)

To disregard the complex ways in which Levinas mobilizes the Jewish tradition over and against “cultural hegemony” or “chauvinism” leaves us with a rather flattened image indeed. It entirely misses how the two strands of his philosophical and Jewish projects work together over and against the West. As Sarah Hammerschlag writes in relation to Levinas and Heidegger, the two strands “ought to be read as one part of a larger strategy to construct and present a vision of Judaism formed in opposition to what Levinas conceives of as Heideggerian paganism.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Generated out of his Jewish and philosophical thought, in other words, is a profound dissatisfaction with and sharp criticism of the structures of Western philosophy. Judaism is what he positions as an alternative. It would, accordingly, be simplistic to naïvely categorize Levinas as Eurocentric without attending to this dynamic. Moreover, in ways not dissimilar to what we saw earlier, it reinforces a binary understanding of Judaism and Europe.

Importantly though, this is not to suggest that Judaism also doesn’t play a more pernicious role in Levinas’s thought. At the same time that Judaism comes to function for him as the site of an alternative, counter-hegemonic tradition in relation to the Christian West, it simultaneously functions to shore up those boundaries, to sustain and perpetuate the very Western biases that he sought to undermine. Judaism comes to align itself with the West over and against a host of others—described, amongst other choice nomenclatures, as “Pagan,” “hordes,” and the “underdeveloped Afro-Asiatic masses.”

Accordingly, my argument here is that Levinas’s Eurocentrism is at one and the same time more expansive and more deeply rooted than is first evident. And the hinge by which we must interrogate this is the question of Judaism. If, as Hammerschlag and others have demonstrated, Levinas positions “Judaism against Paganism and the thinking of the West” through an ethical recasting of Jewish deracination, he just as often upholds the structures of Western dominance and includes Judaism within its bounds.[[26]](#footnote-26) This becomes most evident if we focus our attention on some of the sites we’ve been exploring until now, Zionism and its relationship to European colonialism, debates surrounding decolonization, and their general relation to the figure of the Jew.

## Sartre’s Jewish Question

Jean-Paul Sartre’s influential and widely read *Réflexions sur la question juive* forms one of the shared backgrounds against which we can begin to understand Levinas and Memmi’s respective projects. In his portrayal of antisemitism, Sartre argued that the Jew is constituted exclusively by the enmity of the antisemite. “If the Jew did not exist,” the famous line goes, “the anti-Semite would invent him.”[[27]](#footnote-27) It’s difficult, I think, to overstate the significance this book had.[[28]](#footnote-28) A generation of writers and thinkers took up and responded to Sartre’s arguments, either favorably or not, and used them as a template for understanding not only antisemitism but also colonialism and racism more broadly.[[29]](#footnote-29) Reflecting on Sartre’s legacy almost forty years later, Levinas would repeat some of the early criticisms of the book, pointing out how Sartre’s definition of the Jew was entirely negative. The Jew’s essence, according to Sartre, is constituted *solely* by the gaze of the antisemite. Thus Sartre was never able to recognize, Levinas continues, a positive characteristic or Jewish essence independent of antisemitism. As he puts it, “Sartre does not yet ask himself if resistance with a firm, but naked back, in blood and tears, is not the most human possibility of the human condition itself—a condition that is a non-condition and rooted in the demands, unconditional in their truth, of the one against the many.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

Levinas here echoes two early essays of his which signal the beginnings of his attempt to articulate an alternative image of Judaism. Written largely in response to Sartre and Heidegger, Levinas radicalizes both of their projects and presents Judaism as an alternative condition of being and freedom. In response to Sartre, he recasts the notion of freedom and ties it to a thinking of radical responsibility; both of which he comes to associate with Judaism. “Jewish existence,” he says,

is thus the fulfillment of the human condition as fact, personhood and freedom. And its entire originality consists in breaking with a world that is without origin and simply present. It is situated from the very start in a dimension that Sartre cannot apprehend."[[31]](#footnote-31)

More than ten years earlier in “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” Levinas had already sets forth the terms by which he would oppose Judaism to the Christian West. Christianity, he argues, divides between spirit and body, to the inevitable detriment of the latter. In its place, he proposes a type of *enchaînement*, a recognition of the “ineluctable original chain” that bounds one to the world and others; true freedom, he thinks consists in taking up this responsibility.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Memmi too would respond to Sartre’s provocations concerning the figure of the Jew. As was the case with Levinas—though in an entirely different idiom, and with varying degrees of success—Memmi would acknowledge his profound debt to Sartre while also seeking to escape the latter’s strictly negative characterizations. The dedication of his two-part series, *Portrait of a Jew* (1962) and *The Liberation of the Jew* (1966), reads: “To Jean-Paul Sartre, a free man.” Memmi, however, largely adopts the Sartrean paradigm. His text resounds with an almost melancholic air, and his descriptions of the Jew are for the most part negative. He also suggests that Sarte’s text arose out of circumstantial ignorance, and should he write it again, he would surely change his mind. Only part four of *Portrait of a Jew*, entitled “The Heritage,” alludes toward a positive reversal. Even here, however, the move is largely gestural. Memmi’s expression of positive Judaism doesn’t reach far beyond mere implication, and his form of self-acceptance remains rather vague and insubstantial. “The Jew,” he tells us,

is not just the man who is looked upon as a Jew, nor even the man who reacts to that idea. There is another side to him: he lives a Jewishness and a Judaism that are completely positive. And in large measure he accepts and confirms that Jewishness.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Memmi also recalls the furor he felt after the publication of Sartre’s text. He writes that he immediately sat to down to write a letter to Sartre explaining his mistakes. The letter was never sent, but it concluded, Memmi says, with the impassioned phrase, “now, believe me, the Jew does exist, Jewishness survives!”[[34]](#footnote-34) Such exclamations notwithstanding, Memmi’s “positive Jew” remained rather threadbare. As we’ll see self-acceptance will play a key role in Memmi’s thinking about Judaism and liberation—though precisely what it indicates about the positivity of the Jew is less clear. It’s only with a clear understanding of his relation to Zionism that we can begin to understand what that might entail.

# Zionism, Theology, Politics

Though Levinas’s and Memmi’s responses would originate within a similar set of question, their responses would veer in almost opposing directions. Both Memmi and Levinas were responding to a crisis in and of Judaism brought about in the aftermath of the Shoah and reignited by decolonization. How does Judaism relate to the larger European/Western project, especially insofar as the latter is brought into troubling view through decolonization? What was most urgent—philosophically, materially, spiritually—for French and Algerian Judaism? What position, for that matter, does or should the Jew occupy in relation to France? Though they would take drastically different approaches to these questions, paradoxically enough, both Memmi and Levinas would turn to Zionism in large part as a way of working through them. Thus, rather than adjudicate their positions on Zionism—both of which I think are highly problematic to say the least—I think it’s more instructive to understand how they came about and through what set of associations and separations. The latter offers a better means for understanding how the figure of the Jew gets caught up in the question of Europe, (post) colonialism, and Zionism, and the stakes of what such theological-political maneuvering may be.

In broad strokes, we might say that for Levinas, the role of Judaism becomes primarily associated with religion and a philosophical-theological project while for Memmi, the issue is by and large political. This division is on clear display in one forum where the question of Judaism’s contemporary role was hotly debated: the *Colloque d’Intellectuels juifs de Langue française.* Levinas’s famous Talmudic lessons first appeared at these gatherings, which were primarily attended by Jewish intellectuals. Memmi was an occasional participant and contributor, though he would eventually break off from the Colloque. In an interview given later in life he’d attribute this to a number of reasons, high among them was precisely this division between the theological and the political. Thus he laments “l’orientation traditionaliste du Colloque” ‘the traditional orientation of the Colloque’ which was “dirigés par deux figures importantes : Levinas et Neher… Neher ouvrait le Colloque, Levinas le terminait. Tout était bien encadré par les traditionalistes” ‘led by two important figures: Levinas and Neher… Neher opened the Colloque, and Levinas closed it. Everything was well framed by the traditionalists and one could never escape it.’[[35]](#footnote-35) In Memmi’s mind, the traditional or theological orientation didn’t adequately reflect the needs of most Jews at the time; at a certain point, the concern with theological matters grew overbearing.

By way of contrast, Memmi would also interrogate the liminal space of Judaism, though for him, the matter was largely political. Early on, in *The Colonizer and the Colonized,* Memmi would already point to the ambiguous and disturbing position of the Jews: they occupied an indeterminate zone between colonizer and colonized, unable to fully establish themselves in either side.

The Jewish population identified as much with the colonizers as with the colonized. They were undeniably ‘natives,’ as they were then called, as near as possible to the Moslems in poverty, language, sensibilities, customs, taste in music, odors and cooking. However, unlike the Moslems they passionately endeavored to identify themselves with the French. To them the West was the paragon of all civilization, all culture. The Jew turned his back happily on the East.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Memmi positions the Jew in a liminal space between Arab and French, at times leaning toward a shared indigenous, Arab-Jewish identity, but more often, as he notes in this passage, disavowing that in favor of assimilating into the West. From the outset, the Jew is a liminal figure, caught in a complex web of associations and identity formations that they are never quite able to master.

Thus, they live in painful arid constant ambiguity. Rejected by the colonizer, they share in part the physical conditions of the colonized and have a communion of interests with him; on the other hand, they reject the values of the colonized as belonging to a decayed world from which they eventually hope to escape.[[37]](#footnote-37)

This sense of non-belonging is also notably born out by Memmi’s first autobiographical text, *The Pillar of Salt.* The protagonist’s very name, Alexandre Mordekhai Benillouche, is meant to index the three identities that he simultaneously is and cannot embody, French, Jewish, and Arab. In a famous passage, Memmi describes this scene of impossible affiliation where being a Jew, a native, and an African precludes any possibility of fixed identity. “In the long run, I would always be forced to return to Alexandre Mordekhai Benillouche, a native in a colonial country, a Jew in an anti-Semitic universe, an African in a world dominated by Europe.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

That being the case, what we then have to understand is how this decidedly unstable position of the Jew in the colonial pyramid results in Memmi’s commitment to a national Jewish homeland.[[39]](#footnote-39) This arises in large part due to the singular, almost overbearing logic that dominates Memmi’s entire corpus.[[40]](#footnote-40) Almost each of his books are predicated on the same tri-partite structure: first comes the desire on the part of the colonized or oppressed subject for assimilation, what Memmi calls self-rejection. The colonized wants to resemble the colonizer in all respects, up to the point of “disappearing in him.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Once this fails—the colonizer, of course, will never allow it—the only possible solution is revolt; this first stage in self-acceptance entails, for Memmi, “a recovery of self and of autonomous dignity.”[[42]](#footnote-42) The colonized subject, however, has been indelibly shaped by the colonial relation, and their language, culture, religion, and arts will all be marked by this it. “But who is he?” Memmi wonders, “Surely not man in general, the holder of universal values common to all men. In fact, he has been excluded from that universality.”[[43]](#footnote-43) Accordingly, for Memmi, even self-acceptance is still reactionary, shaped by the colonial domination that wrought it. Memmi thus concludes that, “in order to witness the colonized complete cure, his alienation must completely cease. We must await the complete disappearance of colonization—including the period of revolt.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

If we look at *The Liberation of the Jew,* the logic persists in its precise terminological and structural form. Part one is dedicated to self-rejection, wherein Memmi chronicles a variety of attempts (assimilation, conversion, mixed marriage, etc.) in which the Jew tries to dissolve themselves into Western society. Part two brings us the beginnings of self-acceptance, or what Memmi also calls “encystment.” As was the case with the colonized, however, Memmi contends that self-acceptance remains largely a reactionary posture. This leads Memmi—infamously some might say—to argue that sole possible solution is political Zionism. His morbid diagnosis leads him to conclude that the Jewish condition is an “impossible” one for which he can see no way out, neither under the current structures of European power nor through the Marxist Left.[[45]](#footnote-45) Instead, what’s required, he argues, is a *specific* liberation for each *people* (a people, note, not a class). The Jewish state of oppression—by and large the only one for Memmi, and for Sartre—can only be solved by entirely abolishing its conditions, which he thinks requires national liberation.

Memmi’s response to the set of questions we indicated earlier is thus throughly political in nature, even as it veers toward support for Zionism and the State of Israel.[[46]](#footnote-46) Nonetheless, an interesting moment of overlap occurs between this version and the more theological one. In 1969, only one year after the mass student protests in May 1968 and two years after the six-day war in Israel-Palestine, Memmi gives a talk at the Colloque. The theme that year was, appropriately enough, “Judaism and Revolution.” From the outset Memmi begins his talk on somewhat polemical footing, noting that as a sociologist his task was primarily a comparative one. “Il faut” he says, “oser considérer le judaïsme comme un *fait, comprabale aux autres faits,* et le soumettre aux mêmes impératifs de l’examen objectif” ‘One must dare to consider Judaism as a *fact, comparable to other facts,* and to submit it to the same imperatives of objective examination.’[[47]](#footnote-47) Amongst members of the Colloque, for whom the idea of Jewish election and the unique ethical prerogatives of Judaism reigned supreme, even the suggestion of comparison appeared threatening.[[48]](#footnote-48) Driving the point even further, Memmi then universalizes precisely that desire for uniqueness. “Il veut, il souhaite,” he says, “que son cas soit unique, que sa tradition soit faite uniquement de Trésors éprouvés et de réponses définitivement parfaites” ‘One wants, one wishes, that their case be unique, that their tradition be constructed only of proven treasures and of perfectly definitive responses.’[[49]](#footnote-49) Clearly setting himself apart from many of the members there, Memmi would go on to theorize the notion of revolution specifically within the context of Judaism itself.

The talk was given three years after *The Liberation of the Jew* and picks up on the same themes—except that in addition to the political, Zionist revolutionary, Memmi adds another theologically inflected figure. In the context of the Colloque, it’s almost as if Memmi agrees to play by their rules and agrees to consider a theological model of Jewish revolution. Thus, he runs through the same tri-partite structure, this time insofar as it pertains to a revolution within Jewish culture itself. As we saw in each of his other texts, however, Memmi warns that when it comes to self-acceptance, one still runs the risk of being ensnared in reactionary myths and counter-myths. Only culture, rather than tradition, he suggests, is creative and generative and can offer an adequate response to the historical moment. Tradition, on the other hand—the same tradition, mind you, which members of the Colloque had done so much to vindicate—remains steeped in the old mythology and beholden to an outmoded and reactionary form of self-acceptance. He thus concludes: “Il faut culturaliser la tradition” ‘One must culturalize the tradition.’[[50]](#footnote-50) Consequently, even as he anticipates the possibility of a revolution in Judaism, Zionism is disassociated from its purview and maintains its strict political function.

## Reading Levinas on and in Israel

Let us begin with an anecdote that places Levinas on a tour bus directly in the State of Israel:

When the guide, before letting the participants disembark, explained that the Bedouins were required to burn their tents if they wanted to be eligible to receive stone houses from the government, Levinas remained on the bus. “It’s colonialism!“ he cursed.[[51]](#footnote-51)

The anecdote—sharp in its delivery, almost shocking in its content—has an equally solemn and laughable quality to it. One imagines Levinas visiting Israel (it’s already 1978), a place and a project that he’d done so much to defend, and being shocked at what he sees. His reaction is visceral, immediate, and defiant. He stubbornly remains on the bus and refuses to participate. His words are terse, almost brusque, though what emotions lie behind them, what questions the two simple words beg, what dissonance must have provoked them, one may only wonder. It is almost tempting to hear in Levinas’s exclamation the backlash of his own thought—after all, he had for years tried to characterize the Zionist project almost exclusively as an ethical one. The State of Israel, for him, was tied to the spiritual vocation of the Jewish people and irreducible to what he considered a “common” nationalism. Faced with the realities of state violence, however, did the distinction come back to hit him over the head, as it were, breaking into little pieces and revealing its fragility? Levinas is certainly troubled, but perhaps also frustrated by a certain missed expectation, the expectation that would things would be otherwise than they were.

It’s difficult to say for certain but one year later Levinas would continue to shore up the distinction between Zionism and politics in as essay entitled “Politics After!”—published interestingly enough in *Les Temps modernes,* Sartre’s journal one might recall.[[52]](#footnote-52) Jacques Derrida, one of Levinas’s most astute commentators, points to how Levinas enacts this disjunction between the political and what he refers to as “beyond” the political:

Followed by an exclamation point, the title “Politics After!” seems clear: let politics come after, in second place! The primordial or final injunction, what is most urgent, would not be first of all political, purely political. Politics or the political should follow, come “after”; it must be subordinated—whether in logical consequence or chronological sequence—to an injunction that transcends the political order. As far as the political order is concerned, we will see afterwards, it will come later; politics will follow, like day-to-day operations: “Politics After!”[[53]](#footnote-53)

Derrida, as many others after him, was concerned with the proposed borders of the political and its “beyond.” How sustainable are such distinctions? Who is to decide where one ends and the other begins? What does it mean that the State of Israel, precisely as a state, in its nationalist form, should inaugurate a beyond of the political?

As was the case for Memmi, rather than adjudicate Levinas’s politics and his stance on Israel, I’m more concerned to show how it is that his positions reflect an already ongoing conversation about the figure of the Jew in its relation to Europe. In many ways, Zionism stands in as the political-theological axis against which the question of Judaism and the West is worked out. One can see this emerge, slowly and carefully, throughout his occasional articles and Talmudic lectures. As I’ve been arguing, rather than flattening his position, what emerges is a complicated picture of association and disassociation—Zionism in many ways amplifies this already loaded question.

Levinas’s choice to call the situation in Israel-Palestine colonialism, rather than say unlawful or violent, is also crucial. For it signals to us the degree to which our understanding of his position can’t ignore an analysis of his relation to colonialism and the transnational and imperial contexts which had a substantial effect on how he positioned the role of Judaism. This becomes troublingly clear in a special meeting of the Colloque on February 17th, 1963. Three years in the making, the gathering convened together a number of French and Algerian Jewish intellectuals to discuss the ramifications of decolonization and the influx of North African Jews into France. Their talks speak volumes about the anxieties and hopes of the Colloque, and more importantly, about how they were theorizing the position of French Judaism in relation to the West.

Before commenting explicitly on the meeting, it’s worth pausing for a moment to understand the historical-political backdrop. Since at least the French Revolution and Jewish emancipation, Jewish intellectuals in France had sought to cast themselves as part and parcel of the French republican tradition. They proclaimed a French-Jewish symbiosis, and French Judaism was understood to epitomize a universalist, French perspective As Paula Hyman puts it, French Jews “promoted a communal self-definition that emphasized the harmony of French and Jewish values,” and “expressed their wholehearted devotion to France and to the egalitarian ideals of the Revolution.”[[54]](#footnote-54) Not incidentally, this too cannot be understood without reference to empire. The Alliance israélite universelle, for example, should be seen as a critical component of French-Jewish *imperial* history, demonstrating the importance of transnational and colonial contexts for the Jews of France, while also highlighting the degree to which Jews participated in and sustained French imperialism. Found in the Alliance’s organizational statements are phrases such as “to cast a ray of the civilization of the Occident into the communities degenerated by centuries of oppression and ignorance… by opening their sprits to western ideas, to destroy certain outdated prejudices and superstitions.”[[55]](#footnote-55) The Alliance made clear its desire to uphold the heritage of the French Revolution, and through its expansive network of educational schools that were created throughout the Maghreb, effectively served to perpetuate France’s *mission civilisatrice.*[[56]](#footnote-56)

Important too is Levinas’s involvement with the Alliance through his directorship of the École normale israélite orientale. The school was primarily a teaching institute attended by North African students who would then go on to teach in Alliance schools in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. It formed, in other words, one of the many borders uniting and dividing French and North African Jews and was part and parcel of the enormously complex legacy of the Alliance. One former student, reflecting on Levinas’s role, highlights the degree to which the school functioned in many ways to initiate Sephardi Jews into Western culture: “he [Levinas] was very attentive to the formation of our character, with the initiation into the Parisian world, into Western culture, that awaited us, we who came from Morocco.”[[57]](#footnote-57)

In his opening remarks, Neher recalls this longstanding tradition of French Judaism and notes how the Colloque intended to disrupt that trajectory. Rather than affirm a French-Jewish symbiosis which would all but diminish the import of Jewish values, many members of the Colloque insisted on the unique position of Judaism as an ethical religion. It’s purpose, Neher said, was “pour que les intellectuels juifs de France puissent prendre conscience du fait que le judaïsme est une valeur, qu’il est même la valeur fondamentale et centrale” ‘so that Jewish intellectuals in France could realize the fact that Judaism has a value, that it is even the fundamental and central value.’[[58]](#footnote-58) This history of attachment and separation operates in the background of this moment in 1963 when French and Algerian Jewish intellectuals convene for a dialogue. At stake, in other words, especially at this moment, was articulating the borders of identification and disidentifcation, and of how French and Algerian Judaism relate to this broader question.

In his closing remarks, Levinas picks up on this in rather unsettling ways. He says that one distinguishing feature between French and North African Judaism is that “il y a un judaïsme moderne en France” ‘there exists a *modern* Judaism in France,’ and that “notre [read French] judaïsme sait parler le langage de son temps” ‘our Judaism knows how to speak the language of its times.’[[59]](#footnote-59) Levinas’s opposes this high-brow, modernized-yet-still-relevant French Judaism to the “chaleur et densité religieuse” ‘religious warmth and density’ of North African Judaism. Carrying this stereotypical and hierarchical relation to its conclusion, he says that Algerian Jews came to France “parce qu’ils cherchaient dans l’humanisme français tout ce qu’il y a de meilleur dans le prolongement gréco-romain de notre monde” ‘because they were searching in French humanism for all that is best in the Greco-Roman expansion of our world.’[[60]](#footnote-60) In other words, Levinas is establishing a rigid typological model that depicts French Jews as not only modern but Western and Greek in opposition to North African Jews. He concludes by offering these final remarks, securing his classification and ensuring the prominence of French Judaism. “Nous sommes tous pour la décolonisation” ‘we are all for decolonization,’ he says, and yet with it,

Nous risquons de placer sur le même plan les civilisations de tous ces peuples qui doivent vivre librement et souhaiter un monde à la fois désoccidentalisé et désorientalisé — ou plus exactement un monde désorienté. Contre cette désorientation du monde, dans les deux sense du terme, a protesté le judaïsme algérien quand il est venu en France ; il a voulu, au prix de bien des sacrifices, maintenir son attachment à une certaine hiéarchie des valeurs qui donnent un sens au monde.

We risk placing on the same plane the civilizations of all those people who must live freely and wish for a world that is both de-Westernized and de-Orientalized — or more precisely, a confused world. Algerian Judaism protested against this disorientation of the world, in the two senses of the term, when it came to France; it wanted, at the price of many sacrifices, to maintain its attachment to a certain hierarchy of values which gives meaning to the world.[[61]](#footnote-61)

Decolonization and the decision of Algerian Jews to migrate to France is here recast by Levinas as a commitment to the very Western “values” that he had done so much to undermine. In what can’t but be recognized as a tour de force, Levinas reinstates the French-Jewish commitment to a universalist humanism over and against what he sees as its undoing by the forces of decolonization. Judaism no longer occupies the anti-Greek position that Levinas had so forcefully accorded to it, but now rather joins France in sustaining the hierarchical order of the world—which fortunately enough, Algerian Jews have now recognized.

If we return now to the essay with which I began this paper, we can understand the full extent of what’s at stake in Levinas’s highly charged comments. In “Jewish Thought Today,” Levinas describes precisely how Judaism aligns itself with the West against the “non-West.” The essay was published two years before the Colloque meeting in 1961, and though Levinas never explicitly references the Algerian war, its consequences can be detected right beneath the surface. Over the course of the essay, Levinas stages a reconciliation of Judaism with Christianity and positions both of them over and against everyone else. Thus he writes, in ways that even more strongly echo the hierarchies delineated above: “Surely the rise of the countless masses of Asiatic and under-developed peoples threatens this new-found authenticity?” This “authenticity” refers to Levinas’s re-entrenchment of Judeo-French-Christian unity, what he calls a “Sacred History,” that is now being threatened by the decolonized world. Thus, Levinas concludes: “But under the greedy eyes of these countless hordes who wish to hope and live, *we, the Jews and Christians* are pushed to the margins of history.”[[62]](#footnote-62) What’s evident from these comments—beyond, of course, their racist overtones—is how, for Levinas, Judaism ceases to be a critical voice of the West is now perfectly aligned with and indeed made to support a Judeo-Christian history.

The great irony and paradox of Levinas’s relation to Zionism must be seen within this network of associations, identifications, and hierarchies. For on the one hand—however frail and unconvincing it may seem to us—Zionism for Levinas cannot be reduced to everyday politics. We saw this in “Politics After!” though one could also point to other essays. “The State of Caesar and the State of David,” for instance, reflects Levinas’s attempt to construct political-theological typology for understanding Zionism and its relation to modern nation states. The state of Caesar corresponds to the Greek, political, and imperial power while the state of David represents the Jewish, messianic, and de-politicized state. Beyond these two strata, however, Levinas gestures toward an eschatological beyond of politics, what he refers to as a monotheistic politics. The doubled and contradictory nature of the latter—beyond the political yet somehow in it—is nevertheless tied to and inaugurated with Zionism and the State of Israel. Casting Zionism as the apolitical beyond of politics allows Levinas to reinterpret almost everything that takes place in the State of Israel as presaging a political beyond:

At the heart of daily conflicts, the living experience of the government — and even the painful necessities of the occupation — allow lessons as yet un­taught to be detected in the ancient Revelation. Is a monotheistic politics a contradiction in terms? Or, on the contrary, is this the very culmination of Zionism?[[63]](#footnote-63)

The typology is carried through in “Assimilation and New Culture,” published in 1980. Here the question is between the supposed universalism of the West and the particularity of Judaism. Is there no other way, Levinas wants to know, to express identity aside from assimilation to the universal or insisting on one’s “irremediable particularism?”[[64]](#footnote-64) Levinas, as he so often does, stages a third path: a particularism that exceeds and incorporates the universalism that it simultaneously denies and absorbs.

If we are contesting it at the same time, it is because this ‘withdrawal into the self’ which is so essential to us, and so often decried, is not the symptom of an outmoded stage of existence but reveals a *beyond* of univer­salism, [recall of course, the beyond of the political we just saw] which is what completes or perfects human fraternity. In Israel’s peculiarity a peak is reached which justifies the very durability of Judaism. It is not a permanent relapse into an antiquated provincialism.[[65]](#footnote-65)

This reclamation of self that travels beyond both the particular and the universal heralds the end of assimilation. And this can take place, Levinas thinks, only and precisely in the State of Israel—for, as we saw, it too epitomizes its own version of a beyond.

And yet, on the other hand, and despite all Levinas’s protestations to the contrary, his alignment of Judaism and the West reverses the antagonistic relationship that he’s established. What Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin famous argues in “A National Colonial Theology” is entirely apt with regard to Levinas as well: “Paradoxically,” Raz-Krakotzkin argues, “the exodus of the Jews from Europe *enabled their assimilation into Europe,* without the need for conversion. Nationalism… integrates the two dimensions—the theological and the colonial.”[[66]](#footnote-66) It was precisely by way of Israel and its secularized, colonial theology that Jews participated in and indeed perpetuated the worst of colonial Europe. Thus at the very moments that Levinas attempts to rigorously distinguish between Judaism and the West via a rethinking of politics and the State of Israel, he also concomitantly shores up that very legacy.

Regardless of the many distinctions between them, Zionism for both Memmi and Levinas arose out of their attempts to theorize the position of the Jew in relation to the West. It is surely interesting that Memmi would describe *political* Zionism in almost the same terms as Levinas would describe it theologically. Certainly, the same paradoxical assimilation that we noted with regard to Levinas would apply to Memmi as well. For him too, Zionism was meant to signal the end of assimilation and the chance for Jews as a people to achieve a national autonomous liberation. For him, between assimilation and oppression (the only two options he saw available) the Jewish condition in the diaspora was irredeemable. Liberation from European colonial oppression could only entail a national solution. And yet, insofar as the Jewish condition was fabricated in and by Europe and its colonial apparatus, the State of Israel is a far cry from being liberated from that model, and in many ways perpetuates it.

# Conclusion

Let us return, in conclusion, to Mufti’s comments about the necessity to interrogate the horrific dialectical reversal perpetuated via the State of Israel. Certainly this essay has attempted to make clear that a whole series of reversals are at stake, ones that concern the very figure of the Jew in its relation to the legacies of Europe. One cannot but be struck yet again with the proliferating ironies and complexities of Levinas’s exclamation. “It’s colonialism!” The two words, uttered in and about the State of Israel, display the whole range of paradoxical associations, identifications, and careful political-theological maneuvering that Levinas had crafted. Certainly, they don’t indicate any sort of resolution to those problems. If one thing has become increasingly clear, it’s that the type of binary thinking that surrounds the figure of the Jew in relation to Europe and other minorities is unsustainable. The question of Jewish difference turns on a dime, and reverses itself even quicker, not least when the question of Israel-Palestine is at stake. Attending to these reversals, necessitates thinking together the questions of Europe, (post) colonialism, orientalism, the Jewish question, and Zionism.

This approach is also meant to signal a shift in focus from the discussions of postcolonialism and Jewishness with which we began. First with regard to Zionism, I suggest that it must be seen within a much broader set of questions and concerns that tend to coalesce around the question of Israel-Palestine but are not thereby reducible to it. Whether it is policing the “actionism” of the academy, à la Cheyette, or largely ignoring the centrality of Zionism, à la Rothberg, paradoxically, Israel-Palestine goes under-theorized in these conversations. How do we understand the history of reversals that took place and in what ways did they enable support for the Zionist project? By focusing on the reversals and (dis)associations of Jewishness within this broader context, I want to highlight the possibilities *and* dangers at stake in theorizing Jewish difference, the promises of Jewish thought and its downfalls. The fine line between the two not only undoes the binary conceptions of identity and difference but also offers a different vector through which to interrogate the intertwines histories and legacies of European colonialism and the position of Jews therein.

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1. Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 159–60. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A brief survey includes Bryan Cheyette, *Diasporas of the Mind: Jewish and Postcolonial Writing and the Nightmare of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); see also the special issue of *Wasafiri* dedicated to the subject, Bryan Cheyette, “Jewish/Postcolonial Diasporas: On Being Ill-disciplined,” *Wasafiri* 24, no. 1 (2009): 1–2; Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Aamir R Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); see also the special issue edited by Wili Goetschel and Ato Quayson, “Introduction: Jewish Studies and Postcolonialism,” *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 3, no. 1 (2016): 1–9; Ethan B Katz, Lisa Moses Leff, and Maud S Mandel, eds., *Colonialism and the Jews* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017); Ethan Katz, *The Burdens of Brotherhood: Jews and Muslims from North Africa to France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); Ivan Davidson Kalmar and Derek Jonathan Penslar, eds., *Orientalism and the Jews* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2005); Santiago Slabodsky, *Decolonial Judaism: Triumphal Failures of Barbaric Thinking* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); for a slightly different version, see also Gil Anidjar, *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Goetschel and Quayson, “Introduction: Jewish Studies and Postcolonialism,” 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Goetschel and Quayson, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bryan Cheyette, “Against Supersessionist Thinking: Old and New, Jews and Postcolonialism, the Ghetto and Diaspora,” *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 4, no. 3 (2017): 430. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cheyette, *Diasporas of the Mind*, 26–30. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, “Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity,” *Critical Inquiry*, 1993, 697. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Boyarin and Boyarin, 701; for an alternative viewpoint and a general account of the controversy see Sarah Hammerschlag, “Troping the Jew,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (2005): 371–98. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Boyarin and Boyarin, “Diaspora,” 697. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Sarah Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew: Politics and Identity in Postwar French Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Slabodsky, *Decolonial Judaism*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Mufti’s work has, of course, been extremely prominent in the field, and his book, *Enlightenment in the Colony*, remains one of the better examples of the types of work that can be done. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ato Quayson and Aamir R Mufti, “The Predicaments of Postcolonial Thinking,” *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 3, no. 1 (2016): 152. Mufti is not, we might note, attempting to make quick and dirty comparisons but rather to call out the unambiguous asymmetries of power. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In his article, Cheyette accuses Mufti of slipping into a form of “political actionism” as opposed to critical thinking. Cheyette, “Against Supersessionist Thinking.” 426 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Quayson and Mufti, “The Predicaments of Postcolonial Thinking,” 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. An example of the former is found in Derek Penslar, “Is Zionism a Colonial Movement?” in *Colonialism and the Jews* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017) where he attempts to demarcate between colonial and anti-colonial strands in Zionism. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Enzo Traverso, *The End of Jewish Modernity* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Olivia C Harrison, *Transcolonial Maghreb: Imagining Palestine in the Era of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco, eds., *Radicalizing Levinas* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. John E Drabinski, *Levinas and the Postcolonial: Race, Nation, Other* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Robert Eaglestone, “Postcolonial Thought and Levinas’s Double Vision,” in *Radicalizing Levinas*, ed. Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Cited in Eaglestone, 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Drabinski, *Levinas and the Postcolonial*, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew*, 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Hammerschlag, 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See Michel Rybalka, “Publication and Reception of ‘Anti-Semite and Jew’,” *October* 87 (1999): 161–82 for a discussion of the publication and reception history. That issue of *October* was devoted to reflecting on the books legacy and contains numerous other articles and responses. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Franz Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks* being one of the more famous examples. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Emmanuel Levinas, “A Language Familiar to Us,” *Telos* 1980, no. 44 (1980): 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Emmanuel Levinas, “Being Jewish,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 40, no. 3 (2007): 210. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Emmanuel Levinas, “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 1 (1990): 69; see also Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew*, chap. 3 for a rigorous account of precisely how Levinas radicalizes Heidegger’s project. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Albert Memmi, *Portrait of a Jew* (New York: The Orion Press, 1962), 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Memmi, 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Sandrine Szwarc, *Les intellectuels juifs de 1945 à nos jours* (Le Bord de L’eau, 2013), 156 Translations my own. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon press, 1965), xiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Memmi, 15–16. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Albert Memmi, *The Pillar of Salt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 95–96. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. As I noted, Gil Hochberg and Olivia Harrison also raise this question. They both make the argument that Memmi’s support for Zionism arises due to his “forgetting” of the way that Europe was instrumental in creating and sustaining the division between Arabs and Jews. They point to Memmi’s disavowal of the Arab-Jew and suggest that this indicates the beginning of the end, as it were, and his ultimate support for the Zionist project. While not unsympathetic to the argument, I think both Harrison and Hochberg miss precisely the enigmatic position of the Jew in Memmi’s schema and its inability to occupy any singular position. See Gil Z Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition: Jews, Arabs, and the Limits of Separatist Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010) 20-27; and Harrison, *Transcolonial Maghreb* 87; on Memmi’s disavowal of the Arab-Jew, see Albert Memmi, *Jews and Arabs* (Chicago: J. Philip O’Hara, Inc., 1975) 19-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Robert Bernasconi refers to this as “The Impossible Logic of Assimilation,” though he makes no mention of how it relates to Memmi’s Zionism. See Robert Bernasconi, “The Impossible Logic of Assimilation,” *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 19, no. 2 (2011): 37–49 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 1965, 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Memmi, 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Memmi, 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Memmi, 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Albert Memmi, *The Liberation of the Jew* (New York: Orion Press, 1966) see part three and especially p. 230-239. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. To be more precise, Memmi doesn’t actually attach a special importance to the State of Israel. Any state would have done, he thinks. Though when he says that Uganda, as opposed to Palestine, was “*really* rich and *really* uninhabited,” one can only be struck by what appears to be a striking instance of political naïveté on the part of purportedly decolonial thinker. See Memmi my emphasis [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Albert Memmi, “La Révolution à Travers les Sciences Humaines,” in *Jeunesse et Révolution Dans La Conscience Juive*, ed. Jean Halpérin and Georges Levitte (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972), 45 Translations my own. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. The comments after his talk, published in the proceedings, largely bear this out, and his call for comparison was immediately challenged as an affront to the unique position of Jews. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Memmi, 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Memmi, 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Salomon Malka, *Emmanuel Levinas: His Life and Legacy* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2006), 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Collected in Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 1994 under the heading Zionisms, p. 188-196. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Jacques Derrida, *Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 82–83. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Paula E Hyman, *The Jews of Modern France* (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Cited in Hyman, 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. See Hyman, 77–90. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Cited in Malka, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. André Neher, “Des Monologues au Dialogue,” in *La Conscience Juive Face à L’Histoire: Le Pardon*, ed. Jean Halperin and Eliane Amado Lévy-Valentine (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965), 153 Translations my own [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Emmanuel Levinas, “Discours de Cloture,” in *La Conscience Juive Face à L’Histoire: Le Pardon*, ed. Jean Halperin and Eliane Amado Lévy-Valensi (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965), 238 Translations my own. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Levinas, 239. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Levinas, 240. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 165 my emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 1994, 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Levinas, 199 Note how the question also brings us back to the conversation with we started, in which a similar concern was evident. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Levinas, 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, “A National Colonial Theology: Religion, Orientalism, and the Construction of the Secular in Zionist Discourse,” *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch Fur Deutsche Geschichte*, 2002, 317 my emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)