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(Post)colonial Jews

These three personal pieces are examples of Jewish self-critique which, as Jacqueline Rose shows in her books *The Question of Zion* (2005) and *The Last Resistance* (2007) (reviewed in these pages) has always been part of Jewish culture. Jonathan Boyarin has called this oppositional tradition 'Jewish Cultural Studies' and a new collection, *A Time to Speak Out* (Verso, 2008) edited by Anne Karpf, Brian Klug, Jacqueline Rose and Barbara Rosenbaum, calls it 'independent Jewish voices'.



Jonathan Boyarin Becoming Jewish and the Politics of Difference

I have been asked to reflect on how I and others have 'brought together the (post)colonial/Jewish in our lives and/or work'. Let's not assume, in the first place, that these are separate things that are then brought together. For me, undertaking a lifelong process of *becoming Jewish* as a path to responsible adulthood has, since the time when I first began to articulate a project in those terms, been inseparable from a concern for the politics of difference and the fundamental way they have been shaped, in European modernity, by the venture, management, rationalisation and critique of colonialism. I continued on to graduate school in Yiddish studies both because of a deep nostalgia for a world I had never known, but also – indeed equally – because of a sense that studying what I thought of as 'my own' might help keep me free from some of the arrogance of colonialist anthropology. As I continued, I came to see the linkage in a more constructive light as well, looking to understand the ways that Jewish difference 'inside Europe' was part and parcel of an apparatus, both ideological and practical, that sustained the colonial venture 'outside'.

As I sit to reply to your invitation, I can think of a number of forms that linkage (my attempts to make it visible, and my frequent perception that where I saw linkages others saw quite separate histories, irrelevant one to the other) has taken over the decades since then.

Most saliently frustrating, during the years I spent in an academic wilderness, was the structuring of both progressive

cultural studies and of academic Jewish Studies that for long militated effectively against precisely the connection to which your question points. When I completed a PhD, with a specialty in Jewish ethnography, in the early 1980s it was clear that cultural anthropology programmes hardly saw the ethnography of Jewish communities as part of their purview; even more frustrating was the contempt for the specificity of Jewish cultural dynamics bred by the familiarity with it of many scholars who happened to be Jewish. At the same time, Jewish Studies programmes in those years hardly knew what to do with anthropologists. That my doctoral fieldwork was on a population inside the metropole, Polish Jews in Paris, hardly advanced my efforts to find an academic home, since the discipline has been somewhat slow in realising that Europeans are 'anthropological' people too.

If my own emphasis has been on Ashkenazi Jewish culture, my spouse, Elissa Sampson, taught me much about the lifeworlds, constraints and creativity of North African and Middle Eastern Jewry, and about interethnic Jewish stratification in Israel as, in part, a complex facet or reflection of broader processes of colonial domination and resistance. That divide was also abundantly present in Paris of the 1980s, a place where, to paraphrase Aimé Césaire, there was room for many different kinds of Jews at 'the convocation of cultures'. Yet it was striking how little many of my elderly Polish Jewish comrades felt they had in common with North African Jewish immigrants.

I am no apologist for Ashkenazi chauvinism, yet I confess that the main effect these lessons had on me was a determination to understand better the situation of East European Jews, prior to the devastation of World War Two, as a group that simultaneously enjoyed and struggled to maintain and transform an 'autonomous' cultural identity and was subject to the constraints of internal colonialism. In fact, I returned from Paris in the early 1980s taking notes for what would have been a programmatic review essay on 'The New Diaspora', in which I sought to compare the disruptions of European Jewry as subject to the 'internal colonialism' of European nation-building to the disruptions of Middle Eastern,

North African and Sephardic Jewry subject to, and occupying ambivalent positions within, the overt processes of European colonialism, the collapse of the Ottoman empire and the local nationalisms that came in their wake. That essay remains unwritten and I can only surmise, in retrospect, that I was motivated then by a desire to demonstrate some fundamental unity of Jewish experience across and despite the boundaries of 'Europe', and to underscore a lesson I had learned from Hannah Arendt about the links between nationalism and imperialism. Were I to undertake it today, I suspect it would work more towards elucidating how the experiences of very differently situated people with a shared collective name helps us to articulate what, after all, has always been one human history, shared but not universal.

Yet all of my consciously articulated projects only reinforce the notion that I, as an autonomous agent (separate from '(post)coloniality/and or Jewishness'), have in my 'life and/or work' (also as separable things) brought these things together. As I suggested above, I don't think it's so. I think it's fairer to say that, on the threshold of what we call adulthood, I sensed how profoundly my trajectory had already been shaped by the resources and constraints of modernisation, nationalism, Zionism and colonialism, as well as by Jewishness. I am inexpressibly gratified by the work so many colleagues, especially younger ones, have done in the intervening years to help articulate those connections, and to show how profoundly they illuminate our shared predicament in the aftermath of the twentieth century. It may be the least of their accomplishments that they have, thereby, helped at last to make a place for me within the professional academy.



Eitan Bar-Yosef Playing Kim's Game Under an Orange Tree near Rehovot, 1985

I was a lousy scout leader. I could hardly tie two pieces of rope together, my surveillance skills were inadequate, to say the least, and the only hope lay in my ability to inculcate some basic scouting lore into my group of ten-year-old Fawns. Yes, that's what Baden-Powell's 'Wolf Cubs', the youngest scout pack, were called in Israel: Fawns. Innocent and harmless. I

was sixteen: old enough to realise that the Zionist story was fraught with delusions, contradictions, lies; not quite old enough to understand the role played by my gentle Fawns and myself in this great Zionist game.

We would meet up every Tuesday and Saturday at the local scouts' association situated at the outskirts of our beloved town Rehovot, established in 1890 as a Jewish agricultural colony. 'Rehovot, thou art in Judea, O how I love you so,' the Fawns would chant in shrill voices as we made our way into the lush orange orchards that surrounded the town. In April the scent of orange blossom would permeate the streets and wrap us up in our sleep. This was proud Zionist citrus; oranges even figured in Rehovot's municipal emblem, alongside a Bible (our history! our land!) and a microscope (science! progress!), which was meant to symbolise the Weizmann Institute of Science, founded in Rehovot in 1934. Weizmann was Israel's first president, the man who convinced Balfour back in 1917 to issue the famous Declaration and, for many years, Rehovot's most venerated citizen. They would take us to visit his beautiful manor, designed in the mid-1930s by the modernist architect Erich Mendelsohn. Everybody was always impressed by the exquisite pool and the car, an ancient Lincoln Cosmopolitan, but I was taken by the grandeur of the house itself – the reception room, the great kitchen, the library – a white, bright version of the country houses I read about in the Narnia books or *The Wind in the Willows*.

Yes, you could say I was an anglophile. We all devoured the *Famous Five* books, but I think I was the only one who took it all so seriously. England – green, pleasant, well-mannered, well-watered – seemed so much more desirable than our dusty, nasty, crazy landscape. We were taught that the British were bad, that they betrayed Balfour's vision, and that they tried to hinder the Jews from establishing their own state; no wonder we had to kick them out. Indeed, it was customary for Israeli scouts to re-enact the Zionist campaign against 'perfidious Albion': my good friend Oren took his eleven-year-old scouts to stick anti-British slogans on high street notice boards, while in Jerusalem (as a friend told me years later), some Fawns set out to reconstruct the 1946 bombing of the King David Hotel, smuggling milk pitchers with fake explosives into the hotel.

But I, secretly, yearned for the Mandate to return; yearned to become a colonial subject. Maybe because this was the closest thing to being English; maybe because I felt, instinctively, that while Zionists were so proud of their anti-colonial struggle against the British, they tended to forget that they, too, had adopted quintessential colonial features, especially after the 1967 occupation (a year before I was born, a child of greater Israel). Wouldn't it be better, I thought, to shed this mock colonial mimicry ('greater Israel . . .') and restore the real thing? Oh, if only we could forsake our petty imperial ambitions! If only we could surrender ourselves to the whims of our previous colonial masters and thus emerge, once again — meek, submissive, righteous! I had no wish to blow up the King David Hotel; what I really

wanted was to sit there, on the veranda, in a perpetual five o'clock tea party, bathed in the glorious Jerusalem twilight, a land in which it seemed always afternoon.

Yet beyond these occasional seditious fantasies, I was a good Israeli boy, an obedient Zionist scout; the ridiculous drilling exercises, which we performed so enthusiastically, were meant to ensure that Israeli boys and girls would 'be prepared' for life in the shadow of perpetual war. The Palestinians were rarely mentioned explicitly, but their silent presence hovered above the orange orchards, sometimes materialising, briefly, in the shape of a Bedouin tent perched between the trees; a local version of the gypsies that seemed to haunt our beloved Famous Five. Yes, I was a good boy. After graduating from high school, I joined my fellow scouts in the *Nahal* programme which combined military service with the mission of opening up the land and making the desert bloom. As 'Fighting Pioneer Youth', we lived in a small kibbutz, a tiny agricultural outpost in southern Israel (though safely within the 1967 borders). Oh, frontier life; if only Baden-Powell could see me now! Clearly, my Zionist duty and my anglophile desires were not so distant after all.

Strolling with my Fawns through the orange orchards, we'd halt, sink beneath a tree and play Kim's game. Not that I knew then who Kim was (years would pass before I read the novel in a poco lit course), but the game was helpfully explained in our second bible, Baden-Powell's *Scouting for Boys*. The scoutmaster collects 'about twenty or thirty small articles on a tray' – 'two or three different kinds of buttons, pencils, corks, rags, nuts, stones, knives, string, photos' – and covers them with a cloth. He then makes the others sit round, where they can see the tray, and uncovers it for one minute. Each of them must make a list on a piece of paper of all the articles he can remember: 'The boy who remembers the greatest numbers wins the game' (48–49). Like Kim's Great Game, which began with Kim playing this little, harmless memory game in Lurgan Sahib's wonder shop, there I was, entertaining my Fawns, but actually training them to become better spies for Prime Minister and country — not quite realising how this scene, under the orange tree, dramatised the sort of questions poor Kim was so obsessed with. Yes, there I was, an Israeli Jew, white but not quite, part native, part Sahib, a mock-anglicised Babu, victim and oppressor, all at once. I am Bar-Yosef. I am Bar-Yosef. And what is Bar-Yosef?

At dusk we'd get up and walk back. Sometimes a scout from an older pack would dress up as a Bedouin and startle my little spies. The orange trees would melt into one, big shadow. Be prepared, gentle Fawns. Be prepared.

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Miriam Sivan 'There's no Place like Home(s)'

The American literary critic Robert Alter identified a tension between home and horizon in Jewish Israeli literature. I live that tension, but differently than most native writers. As an immigrant to Israel, home for me is both Israel and the United States where I was born and lived into adulthood. For me home is *homes*.

My relationship to horizon is also different. While the three continents that spread out from this hinge of land call out to me as well – respite, a place to unpack the load of Jewish people, Torah, memory, god and destiny – horizon, like home, is also both there and here, then and now.

I produce fiction in diasporic English about life back in the 'centre' featuring protagonists who are often, like myself, cultural and linguistic hybrids. The long *via dolorosa* of Jewish history – the many stations of exile and occupation – rolling down on to the present like a wave, is also germane to my point of view as a writer and as a Jew.

In the novel I just completed my protagonist references Israel and New York as home. She is also entangled with Europe during World War Two and, even earlier, with *Sepharad*, Spain of the Expulsion and the Inquisition, but also with the Golden Age and its sample co-existence.

In an earlier novella my protagonist, also an ex-New Yorker, thinks about Berlin from which her family fled, about Kafka, about the refugee Bauhaus architects who built prolifically in Tel Aviv in the 1930s. These preoccupations reflect her sense of displacement in present day Israel. She lives in the *altneuland* of Zionism, nostalgic for the diaspora, and seeks safety from the trials of married life in an ancient city of refuge.

This long and layered view of Jewish existence is a natural expression of the ancient ruins, the landscape of olive trees, grape arbours, the goat and cow herds and occasional camel that I experience in my daily life in the Galilee. Last week I went to the archaeological site of Tzipori, twenty minutes from my home, on the road to Nazareth. A bustling multinational metropolis in 200CE, Tzipori was renamed

Sepphoris by Greek colonists, Dioceserea by Rome, Saffuriya by Islamic conquerors and La Saphorie by Crusader militia. Walking around the Byzantine watchtower at the top of the hill I saw enormous stones from the Roman-era ruins incorporated into the walls. Hundreds of years later the Ottomans built an addition on top and, inside, a Jewish cistern from 2,000 years ago still collected water. Three distinct historical epochs and ruling cultures are exhibited in this structure watching over the hills. A fourth epoch is also on display: contemporary Israel with its agenda of reclaiming the Jewish past. Is this (post-)colonialism to the third or fourth power?

I feel at home and enlivened by this palimpsest of history. My characters do too, except when they don't, but this is more often a function of psychology than politics or history. I feel inspired to describe the dense strata of this post-exilic mesh in my writing. (I have long come to the conclusion, aided by the plethora of archaeological evidence, among other reasons, that there are no innocents in the ancient ongoing tug-of-war over land and power, no simple victim and victimiser. There is a continuum of injustices done to and done by. All are invited to find their places.)

After Rome's occupation, the Jews experienced colonisation on other peoples' lands. The locked ghetto walls became the objective correlative of this bizarre displacement. Post-colonialism, as applied to Jews now, refers first to a return to land and then to sovereignty. Yet this new status has resulted in the governance of the Palestinians who are also

post-colonials when one considers the end of hundreds of years of Ottoman rule and three decades of British. Yet those in the Palestinian Authority remain colonised, occupied, ironically, wretchedly, by Jews who fought hard for their own long deferred autonomy. *Inshallah* the day will soon come when they too will be entirely 'post-'.

For me, moving to Israel was a linguistic as well as a physical relocation. Though I live Hebrew in my daily life and in my professional and creative life, I still know myself in English. Even 'at home' I am diaspora. Even in the ontological centre of (traditional) Jewish consciousness, the tension between home and horizon reminds me that I belong not to one place, but to many.

Recently I decided to broaden my horizons even further. After the Jewish holidays I will begin learning spoken Arabic in my town's Memorial Centre for the Fallen Soldiers. And all the while my next novel gestates in English. There will be an old man in the story, a supporting character, a Polish Jew who came to Palestine in 1920. When the novel opens he will be living with his granddaughter, the main character, a recent widow with a son in the army and a daughter in high school. The old man is beginning to lose touch with the here and now and speaks almost exclusively in Yiddish, his *mamma loshen*, which his family barely understands. Collapsing horizons, the past prescient in the polyglot present; this is where I feel most at home.

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