


OPINION PAPER (PARADIGM RESPONSE)

## On a Double Decker Omnibus to Golders Green<sup>1</sup>

Bryan Cheyette 

University of Reading, UK  
Email: [b.h.cheyette@reading.ac.uk](mailto:b.h.cheyette@reading.ac.uk)

My abiding memory of Daniel Boyarin is sitting with him on the top deck of one of London's famous red buses. We were traveling to Golders Green to eat a kosher meal after a conference in central London. It was the summer of 1994, at the height of Western optimism that the Oslo Accords would bring the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to an end. This optimism, however naive, resulted in an extraordinary phenomenon. Closeted Jews in the British academy attended the conference by the hundreds. The late Laura Marcus and I, who organized "Modernity, Culture, and 'the Jew,'" were expecting a handful of specialists along with the invited speakers, such as Daniel Boyarin. Instead, the audience was made up of a rainbow alliance of out-Jews and other others who could no longer fit on a single red bus but needed a fleet of double-deckers. This was a time when a new iteration of Jewish studies—feminist, fluidly gendered, postcolonial, anti-racist, anti-Eurocentric—came into being and has, thankfully, influenced future generations of scholars.<sup>2</sup> No less important, it was a time of a momentary and unspoken hope that the world could be healed and that *tikkun olam* (the "repair of the world") might at long last be on the horizon.

This collective sense of hope, and the intellectual excitement and energy that was generated, is now part of a shared past. Peace between Israelis and Palestinians has been replaced by an Israeli ethno-nationalist state engineering a one-state solution in a bid to further exclude the Palestinians. Jews are more divided than ever between religion and secularism, diaspora and nation, fear and hope, which reflects the increased polarization within and between all nations. Boyarin

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<sup>1</sup> This response is dedicated to Laura Marcus, who died, all too soon, before it was published. She is a part of the story that I tell. Her wisdom and good humor will stay with me always.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, eds., *Jews and Other Differences: The New Jewish Cultural Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), and Bryan Cheyette and Laura Marcus, eds., *Modernity, Culture, and "the Jew"* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998). The latter collection includes an afterword by Paul Gilroy, who was a founder of British cultural studies and who clearly recognized its intellectual affinity.

proposes a “no-state solution” to our present-day “New Jewish Question” in a characteristically heretical move. Much of Boyarin’s historical scholarship locates a universalist Judaism (as opposed to the “modern notion of Judaism” as religion) in late antiquity and views “(Judeo-) Christianity” as one expression of such universality. His scholarly focus on transgressive border crossings, violent partitions, and hybrid or impure cultures speaks to our contemporary moment. That the world will eventually be repaired is hardwired into a Judaic belief system.<sup>3</sup> For Boyarin, a universal Judeo-Christianity in ancient times, defying all categories and incorporating the Other in their own otherness, is a form of healing and an ethical standard that he applies to our contemporary moment. But this version of “Judeo-Christianity” could not be further from its appropriation either by the authoritarian right (in the name of Western civilization) or by postcolonial theorists (in the name of Western racism and colonialism).<sup>4</sup>

It is perhaps such terminological confusion that has led to the “furious response” and “vehement opposition” that his provocative “paradigm piece” has received. This response is not, Boyarin tells us, from those who usually try and silence him—the authoritarian right—but from those on the “supersessionist” left who disavow any form of Jewish collectivity. The latter position has been articulated by Adam Sutcliffe, who argues that left-wing Jewish intellectuals, influenced by Hannah Arendt, have rejected the “prioritization of Jewish collective solidarity” in response to unwarranted “violent Israeli actions.”<sup>5</sup> The implication is that the existence of the Israeli state, by definition, deforms the very notion of Jewish collective solidarity, including the diaspora (reduced to ethno-politics), which is deemed equally unacceptable from a progressive standpoint. For those who would wish to universalize their “Jewishness” (or “Jewish purpose” *pace* Sutcliffe) the focus is on the present and not the past, cosmopolitanism rather than collectivism, and lived rather than received experience. Boyarin’s proposal for an “ethical form of Jewish collective continuity” could not be further from Sutcliffe’s supposedly “Arendtian” position. I have raised the question of Arendt’s individualism elsewhere (a small number of intellectual “pariahs” contrasted against the vast majority of deluded communal “parvenus”).<sup>6</sup> Such individualism, according to Boyarin, is a product of a westernized construction of “religion” where people are split between universal citizenship in public and an “Indian/Hindu/Jew in

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), and Daniel Boyarin, *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Nathan and Anya Topolski, eds., *Is there a Judeo-Christian Tradition? A European Perspective* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), and Marshall Grossman, “The Violence of the Hyphen in Judeo-Christian,” *Social Text* 22 (Spring 1989): 115–22. See also, Bryan Cheyette, “Postcolonialism and the Study of Antisemitism,” *American Historical Review* (October 2018): 1238 and *passim*.

<sup>5</sup> Adam Sutcliffe, *What Are Jews For? History, Peoplehood, and Purpose* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 254.

<sup>6</sup> Bryan Cheyette, *Diasporas of the Mind: Jewish and Postcolonial Writing and the Nightmare of History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 9–13.

your soul and your home” in private. Perhaps, Boyarin’s paradigm piece should be retitled “*Judaïtude* and the critique of individualism”?

But we all find hope in different places. For Boyarin, resources for hope include the defamiliarizing of Christian supersessionism, Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), and the subterranean counter-history of Zionist ideology (pace Dmitry Shumsky). Although I could not agree more with this triad, which resonates with my own scholarly work, we do have some differences of interpretation, which I will foreground in the spirit of constructive criticism, while honoring Boyarin’s scholarship and thinking activism. Just as Partha Chatterjee enables Boyarin to reconsider “spiritual nationalism,” Judith Butler’s *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (2012) is a key resource in allowing me to complicate the paradigm piece. Is a Judeocentric (“like Jews”) reimagining—rather than seeing similarities in dissimilars—ethically good for those considered to be “cultural others”? Here Butler’s famous “problem” (whether to critique Zionism from a Jewish perspective or not) speaks to Boyarin:

However important it may be to establish Jewish opposition to Zionism, this cannot be done without a critical move that questions the sufficiency of a Jewish framework, however alternative and progressive, as the defining horizon of the ethical. The opposition to Zionism requires the departure from Jewishness as an exclusionary framework for thinking both ethics and politics.<sup>7</sup>

Butler’s “New Jewish Question” is entirely opposed to Boyarin’s. In her reading, a “Jewish framework” is reduced to particularist “exceptionalism” and should be rejected in favor of “more fundamental democratic values” otherwise known as universalism. Boyarin counters such an argument by raising the issue of the “theology of supersessionism” or the division of the world into old and new, particularist and universalist, Jewish and Christian. I have written at length about secular supersessionism—what Ato Quayson calls “chronological supersessionism”—in this journal and so will not repeat myself.<sup>8</sup> But there is no doubt that Butler’s Jewish “problem” is a *prima facie* instance of supersessionism not only denying “Jewish” universalism but characterizing it as “exclusionary” (in relation to ethics and politics). To adopt a phrase from Fanon, Butler “destroys” Jewish “impulsiveness”<sup>9</sup> by presuming that Jewish

<sup>7</sup> See Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 2, and Cheyette, *Diasporas of the Mind*, 6–18, for metaphorical thinking (or “seeing similarities in dissimilars”).

<sup>8</sup> Bryan Cheyette, “Against Supersessionist Thinking: Old and New, Jews and Postcolonialism, the Ghetto and Diaspora,” *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 4.3 (2017): 427–29 and passim. See also Ato Quayson, *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice or Process?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 9, and Susannah Heschel, “From Jesus to Shylock: Christian Supersessionism and *The Merchant of Venice*,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 99.4 (2006): 407–31.

<sup>9</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 113. The formulation “has destroyed black impulsiveness” is a mistranslation of “a détruit l’enthousiasme noir.” Charles Lam Markmann, the original English translator of *Black Skin, White Masks*, prefers “has destroyed black zeal” as do I. More importantly, so does Kwame Anthony Appiah in his

universalism is merely an early stage of “more fundamental democratic values” that are truly universalist because not Jewish.

There is, Boyarin rightly maintains, “no reason why Jews have more or less right to collective existence than any other ... nation.” In other words, Butler’s position is another repetition of Arendtian individualism disavowing Jewish collective existence. At the same time, and here I differ from Boyarin, decolonizing the structures of supersessionist thinking includes a rejection of the westernized foundational construction of Judaism/Jewishness/*Judaïtude* as the “classic” or original or formative expression of (to use Butler’s examples) politics or ethics. Foundationalism, I argue, lays the groundwork for supersessionism, which either makes Jews invisible as a diasporic minority or hyper-visible at the expense of other Others.<sup>10</sup> For this reason, decolonizing Jewish history—not least in terms of our contemporary understanding of “Judeo-Christian”—so as to make it “unexceptional” (in Butler’s terms) is crucial. I fully appreciate how painful this argument might be for Boyarin (given his scholarship on the foundational history of Judaism as an integrated culture) but, clearly, ancient versions of “Judeo-Christian” have nothing in common with our contemporary westernized usages. Such foundationalism is, therefore, a rather modern phenomenon that should be decentered and decolonized.<sup>11</sup>

Boyarin’s reading of *Black Skin, White Masks*, for instance, exposes the limits of a Judeocentric interpretation of the text. The identitarian vocabulary that is used—“Fanon cries out his own identification between colonial racism and racism against Jews”; “putting Jewishness and blackness in conversation with each other”; “the ligature between Jews and blacks”—is at odds with a reading of *Black Skin, White Masks*, which stresses, again quoting, “ambivalence” and “aporia.” But this latter indeterminate vocabulary of difference is drowned out by the desire for identification: “Fanon is marking here through the Jew his own ambivalence between asserting his black identity and wishing to escape it.” My reading of *Black Skin, White Masks* as an equivocal form of identification and difference is not just in relation to Fanon’s circumscribed “ambivalence” toward his “black identity” but in connection with the racialized contradictions between “Jewishness and blackness” as he comprehended them.<sup>12</sup>

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introduction to Philcox’s new translation: “Zealousness is the arm *par excellence* of the powerless” (xiii).

<sup>10</sup> Cheyette, “Against Supersessionist Thinking,” 436–39.

<sup>11</sup> Santiago Slabodsky, *Decolonial Judaism: Triumphal Failures of Barbaric Thinking* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1–16. See also Susannah Heschel, “Ending Exile with the Prophetic Voice of the Diaspora Jew” (<https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/author/susannah-heschel/>). Heschel rightly argues that Jewish studies should be renewed via the “ethics of transcultural encounter.” Here Rabbi Hillel’s dictum: “If I am only for myself, what good am I?” (movingly evoked by Boyarin) enables Jewish studies to become, what Heschel calls, an “active voice for social justice in diaspora.”

<sup>12</sup> Cheyette, *Diasporas of the Mind*, 43–77. My argument is an attempt to understand Fanon in terms of the play of sameness and difference, universalism and particularism, the lived experience of exile and of racism. Here I follow Boyarin and limit my discussion to the identification and difference between “Jewishness and blackness.” My longer work locates Fanon somewhere between Memmi,

Henry Louis Gates was the first to argue in the 1990s that Fanon had become a “Rashomon-like” figure who could be interpreted and appropriated from radically different critical positions.<sup>13</sup> He concluded that the rewriting of a decontextualized Fanon has resulted in a “tableau of narcissism, with Fanon himself as the Other that can only reflect and consolidate the critical self.”<sup>14</sup> Boyarin enacts precisely this form of critical narcissism—“so much of Fanon speaks to me directly”—because of Fanon’s profound understanding of the “costs of [the] forces of deracination.” But while the costs of deracination, or cosmopolitanism, is one trajectory of Fanon’s life and work, as others have argued, it is also something that he resisted fiercely.<sup>15</sup> His “minor episodes in family history,” an inflammatory description of the Jewish genocide, indicates, for instance, an understanding of anti-Semitism and fascism as a matter primarily for the (“minor”) European continent. Racism and colonialism are more global. The contrast between the local (Europe) and the global is reinforced in the text by a series of oppositions—white and black, inside and outside, mind and body—to show the fundamental differences between anti-Semitism and racism (“I am given no chance. I am over-determined from the outside”).<sup>16</sup>

Fanon’s shifting identification and differentiation between two oppressed and wounded peoples is, I believe, embedded in the text. *Black Skin, White Masks* can read like a mobius strip (especially chapter 6) with much of his engagement with Jews and Jewishness returning (in his footnotes) to his initial 1945 reading of Sartre’s “Portrait de l’antisémite” in *Les Temps Modernes* (the first and best chapter of *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 1946) along with Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950). Fanon had lived through the Vichy-led discrimination against the handful of Jews in Martinique, which was one of the main reasons that he had decided to “knock Hitler off his hilltop” and join the Free French Army in 1943.<sup>17</sup> Against his own council, he invoked the “debatable features” of Jews—“black and curly” hair and beard—because they were described by Sartre in *Anti-Semite and Jew* but taken from anti-Semitic wartime sources.<sup>18</sup>

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Sartre, Améry, and Césaire to show the incommensurable formulations and perceptions of his hybrid text (often characterized as bricolage), which cannot (and should not) be reduced to identity.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Louis Gates, “Critical Fanonism,” *Critical Inquiry* (Spring 1991): 457–58 and passim.

<sup>14</sup> Gates, “Critical Fanonism,” 465, 470.

<sup>15</sup> Ross Posnock, *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), and Cheyette, *Diasporas of the Mind*, 45–52.

<sup>16</sup> “Regarding the Jew, we think of money and its derivatives. Regarding the black man, we think of sex ... The black man represents the biological danger; the Jew, the intellectual danger.” Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 138–43. See Cheyette, *Diasporas of the Mind*, 54–68, for a reading of these binaries. See also Sarah Phillips Casteel and Heidi Kaufman, *Caribbean Jewish Crossings: Literary History and Creative Practice* (Charlottesville, NC, and London: University of Virginia Press, 2019), 301–10.

<sup>17</sup> David Macey, *Frantz Fanon: A Life* (London: Granta Books, 2000), 83–84, 92–97. Macey shows that Fanon’s Antillean philosophy professor, who is commonly held up as an exemplar, not only by Boyarin but also by Caryl Phillips and Paul Gilroy, actually argued that “what is happening in Europe is no concern of ours. When white men kill each other, it is a blessing for blacks” (88).

<sup>18</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman, “The Jew in Sartre’s *Réflexions sur la question juive*: An Exercise in Historical Reading,” in *The Jew in the Text*, eds. Tamar Garb and Linda Nochlin (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995), 201–18, and Cheyette, “Fanon et Sartre: Noirs et Juifs,” *Les Temps Modernes* 635–36 (November 2005–January 2006): 159–74.

The only collective group of Jews Fanon discusses in *Black Skin, White Masks* as Jews (rather than as part of a racialized imaginary) are Jewish psychoanalysts whom he rejected vehemently not least because of the Freudian foundations of the archetypal “minor family history” known as the Oedipus complex. The anger with which he dismissed this group – “neither Freud nor Adler ... took the black man into consideration in the course of [their] research” – reflects his desire to understand the “psychic cost of deracination,” and much else, but as a *Black*, decolonized psychoanalyst.<sup>19</sup> None of this, I firmly believe, should discount Fanon as an interlocutor for Boyarin not least when he also addressed the collective fate of Algerian Jewry.<sup>20</sup> But the grounds for their conversation should not be Judeocentric; not even when Fanon was accused of being an “Israeli spy” in Algeria; nor even when his North African comrade Albert Memmi thought of Fanon’s many and varied “impossible” identities as akin to the universalist “Jewish intellectual”; nor even, finally, when Fanon adopted the model of the “organic” African intellectual precisely to counter his own cosmopolitanism.<sup>21</sup> A Judeocentric perspective circumscribes Fanon’s otherness and is in danger, as Gates argued, of being merely a form of critical narcissism.

After all, Fanon at the time of decolonization spoke of the present moment as a “tabular rasa”<sup>22</sup> precisely to provincialize Europe (and “the Jews”) so that the “wretched of the earth” could make a redemptive new beginning outside of European thought and history. His quest for a new form of nation-state, which differed from the Western model, brings us to Boyarin’s ideal of the “diaspora nation” and his use of Dmitry Shumsky’s *Beyond the Nation-State: The Zionist Political Imagination from Pinsker to Ben-Gurion* (2018). To be sure, Shumsky is compelling when he argues that Zionist ideologues did not write from the position that a sovereign Jewish nation-state in Palestine was inevitable. Such teleological history, which is all too commonplace, is rightly critiqued as a form of anachronism that is politically expedient. He also notes convincingly that there are many different forms of non-Western national self-determination, not least in the Ottoman territories, that were considered by his chosen

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<sup>19</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 130. Fanon’s prime example of an unsuitable Jewish “doctor,” when it comes to treating Black patients, is Michel Salomon:

Although he swears the contrary, he stinks of racism. He is a Jew who has had a “thousand years of experience of anti-Semitism,” and yet he is a racist. Just listen to him: “To deny that his skin, his hair, and that aura of sensuality he [the black man] exudes, does not spontaneously generate a certain embarrassment, whether of attraction or revulsion, would be to deny the obvious in the name of a ridiculous prudishness that has never solved anything.” Later on he goes to the extreme of telling us about the “extraordinary stamina of the black man.” (177–78)

<sup>20</sup> Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. H. Chevalier ([1959]; reprint London: Earthscan Publications, 1989), 153–55. See also Bryan Cheyette, “Frantz Fanon and the Black-Jewish Imaginary,” in *Frantz Fanon’s “Black Skin, White Masks”: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. Max Silverman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), chap. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Albert Memmi, “The Impossible Life of Frantz Fanon,” *Massachusetts Review* (Winter 1973): 9–39, esp. 32, and, Cheyette, *Diasporas of the Mind*, 46–54, 75–76.

<sup>22</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2004), 1.

ideologues.<sup>23</sup> It is this latter point that Boyarin foregrounds in his prescriptive desire for a form of Jewish collectivity without sovereignty, as an alternative to the state of Israel, which he calls the “diaspora nation.” My issue with Shumsky is that, apart from recognizing a rich array of historical possibilities for Jewish national self-determination, his reconstructions are nothing more than “what-if” scenarios that are limited by a Zionist framework.<sup>24</sup>

What I mean by a “Zionist framework” is, quite literally, that Shumsky has excluded the history of Jewish territorialism (even as a feature of his exemplary ideologues) that opposed Palestine-centred Jewish nationalism in the first half of the twentieth century. The Jewish Territorial Organisation (ITO) was formed in 1905 after Herzl’s so-called Uganda Plan (a Jewish enclave in Kenya) was rejected by the Seventh Zionist Congress. Members of the newly formed ITO regarded themselves as part of the same genealogy as Zionists going back to Leon Pinsker’s territorialism in his *Autoemancipation* (1882). As Pinsker wrote, “The goal of our present endeavours must not be the Holy Land, but a land of our own.”<sup>25</sup> Herzl, with his multiple focus on the wider Ottoman Empire, Egypt, Argentina, and Kenya, was no less a territorialist than Pinsker. The reason why ITO pursued autonomous safe havens throughout the world—in Canada, Australia, Angola, Kenya, Libya, Portugal—was that their priority was to save lives, 5 million East European Jews to be precise. Their slogan, “People Ahead of Land,” opposed Zionism, which, in these terms, put “Land Ahead of People.” This was a crucial debate, with life-saving consequences, which is clearly still relevant to Boyarin’s “New Jewish Question” and has enormous ramifications. Unlike ITO, which represented all diaspora Jews (insofar as they were under threat), the Zionist congress claimed only to represent those Jews in Palestine or those who wanted to migrate to Palestine. It was this political difference that played itself out up until the Second World War.

Two main insights are gained by including ITO. First, we extend our understanding of the different forms of diasporic national collectivism that ITO proposed as a refuge for lives under threat. Second, the often violent struggle between ITO and the Zionist movement is precisely a way of exposing the limitations of Zionist thinking, not least in relation to the Palestinians, that was part of a political divide that went far beyond the “Zionist imagination.” ITO came into being precisely because it recognized that 600,000 Palestinians prohibited a Jewish national homeland. When Israel Zangwill, the leader of ITO, spoke notoriously of “a land without a people for a people without a land,” he was sloganizing on behalf of territorialism not Zionism.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Dmitry Shumsky, *Beyond the Nation-State: The Zionist Political Imagination from Pinsker to Ben-Gurion* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2018), 1–23.

<sup>24</sup> Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *What Ifs of Jewish History: From Abraham to Zionism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), chap. 7 and 8.

<sup>25</sup> Leon Pinsker, *Autoemancipation: An Appeal to his People by a Russian Jew* (1882) in *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader*, ed. Arthur Herzberg (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1959), 179–98, esp. 194. See also Gur Alroey, *Zionists without Zion: The Jewish Territorial Organisation and Its Conflict with the Zionist Organisation* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2016), 1–14.

<sup>26</sup> Alroey, *Zionists without Zion*, 123–71.

Boyarin's "diaspora nation" is a form of nonsovereign, nonterritorial national collectivity that speaks both to the past but also to our contemporary moment. David Hollinger's *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (2005) is evoked because of Hollinger's optimistic sense of America as a "site for transnational affiliations."<sup>27</sup> Hollinger contends that this ideal is possible today because of his sophisticated revisioning of American multiculturalism so as to challenge the reductive "ethnoracial pentagon," which constitutes American pluralism. His aim is for different ethnicities to affiliate across and between communities based on consent rather than descent (after Werner Sollors), affiliation rather than identity, and cosmopolitanism rather than pluralism.<sup>28</sup> In this model of (post-) ethnicity, communalism is fluid and identity is plural and partial so that one can, for instance, move in and out of Jewishness. This is not the same as Boyarin's sense of a "national life as members of the Jewish Nation whenever and in whatever State we are in." But Boyarin's "diaspora nation" is certainly preferable to "diaspora nationalism," which is the product, as Hollinger argues, of American conservative pluralism. Although Boyarin leaves it to others to achieve his ideal of multiple diaspora nations, as a means of healing the world, it is certainly worth evoking his version of diasporism to oppose politically both territorial and diaspora nationalism. In the meantime, we will stay on the red London omnibus until it reaches its destination.

**Author biography.** Bryan Cheyette is Chair in Modern Literature and Culture at the University of Reading and a Fellow of the English Association. He is the author or editor of eleven books, most recently *Ghetto: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2020). He is currently working on *Testimonies: Slaves, Camps, Refugees* as well as *British Antisemitism at the end of Empire: From Arendt to Zangwill*.

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<sup>27</sup> David Hollinger's *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 15.

<sup>28</sup> Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, 1–18. Hollinger prefers the term *cosmopolitanism* (contra Boyarin) so as to broaden out a conservative pluralism and, also, *affiliation* (which goes beyond the singular) rather than *identity* (which tends to be fixed and limited by descent).

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