Four Views on Ethnicity

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Linda Hutcheon

Crypto-Ethnicity

WHEN I WENT from being a Bortolotti to being a Hutcheon, my social and cultural interactions within a predominantly Anglo-Saxon environment changed; my ethnic identity became encrypted, silenced, unless articulated by choice—a pointed lesson in the constructedness of concepts of ethnicity. Like me, Cathy (Notari) Davidson, Marianna (De Marco) Torgovnick, and Sandra (Mortaro) Gilbert are crypto-Italian teachers of English. What we do not share, however, is nationality: they are Italian American, while I am Italian Canadian. I therefore may have a somewhat different experience of ethnicity and its encrypting.1

Without a melting-pot ideology or a pluralist national identity to rally around, Canadians—be they British, Chinese, Italian, Pakistani, or Somali—have only the model of officially defined multiculturalism with which to construct their sense of self-in-nation. I first became aware of the different political associations of the word multicultural in Canada and the United States during the so-called culture wars. While political denunciations of multiculturalism—seen as a reconfiguration of national identity resulting from the perceived loss of a single common culture—were frequent enough in the United States, most often the term was used there in a more limited sense to define the dominant ideology on college campuses, which was said to be contaminated by political correctness. Dinesh D'Souza was not the only one who worried about the “ethnic cheerleading” implied in certain curricular changes (33); Henry Louis Gates, Jr., too expressed concern about potential “ethnic chauvinism” in the multicultural academy (“Studies” 288). Some scholars worried that multiculturalism’s politics of difference might simply be another way of ensuring white supremacy (Wiegman); others voiced related fears that interest in ethnic studies would elide the historical realities of race through the use of a European immigrant paradigm as the master narrative of difference (San Juan 132).2 Nevertheless, in the United States, the
associations of multiculturalism soon broadened beyond race and ethnicity to include issues of gender, sexual choice, and occasionally class.

In contrast, multiculturalism in Canada is not so much a question of the canon or of campus politics as a legal matter of national self-definition. Canadians' self-understanding is in part forcibly defined by its designation as multiple rather than single. An early usage of the term multicultural appears in a 1970 report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism entitled The Cultural Contribution of the Other Ethnic Groups. "Other ethnic groups" referred to all who were not aboriginal. From this report came a 1971 policy statement by Pierre Elliott Trudeau, Canada's prime minister, and in 1988 the Act for the Preservation and Enhancement of Multiculturalism in Canada. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms also articulates a commitment to protecting the nation's multicultural heritage. Such legal provisions are perhaps typical of Canadian political society, which the political philosopher Charles Taylor has characterized as "more committed to collective provision, over against American society that gives greater weight to individual initiative" (Reconciling 159). In Quebec, as in polyglot (and thus misnamed) English Canada, there exists a "plurality of ways of belonging" that Taylor calls "deep diversity" (183).

It is no accident that it was Trudeau, the fierce federalist opponent of Quebec separation, who formulated the policy statement about multiculturalism in the early 1970s. Changing Canada's self-image from bicultural to multicultural was not simply a recognition of a demographic reality; it had a political purpose and, in some people's eyes, a political result (see Multiculturalism). On the night of the 1995 separation referendum, Quebec's premier, Jacques Parizeau, lamented that the (French) québécois chance for independence had been ruined by what he controversially referred to as "money and the ethnic vote." It is also no coincidence that national multicultural policies were introduced at the same time that Quebec was developing its own discourses of decolonization, derived from francophone theorists such as Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon. For some, these policies still function as implicit barriers to the recognition of both québécois demands for independence and aboriginal peoples' land claims and desire for self-government.

The novelist Neil Bissoondath, a self-proclaimed assimilated Canadian, has voiced other objections to multiculturalism as official government policy. In Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada, Bissoondath writes that he does not feel as if he is part of the Trinidadian community in Canada, that he moved away from the West Indies to start a new life, to expand his horizons, to move beyond the confines of his cultural heritage. Yet not all Canadian immigrants arrive with such choices and hopes, and many have suffered the displacement of forced emigration. The ease of acculturation Bissoondath experienced has arguably been made possible by the very policies he is attacking: before 1971 Canada was anything but hospitable to immigrants, especially to
nonwhites. However, Bissoondath is responding at least in part to the idea of government intervention in ethnicity and culture, which he regards as a personal matter, and to the reduction of ethnic and racial difference to institutionalized, grant-supported folklore or, worse, ethnic food festivals and parades.

History and geography conspired to create ethnic enclaves in Canada. Unlike the United States, Canada experienced no drive westward from an Atlantic beginning; instead, as Cole Harris puts it, a disjointed archipelago was settled one island at a time by various European groups with different technologies and economies, not to mention languages and customs. The result was “dense networks of kin and local traditions that amalgamated elements of the different regional backgrounds of founding populations into distinctive folk cultures” (465). Some Canadians fear that these cultures will be reified into compulsory and limiting identity labels and that, as a result of the national policy of multiculturalism, “familial genealogies . . . or biologism” could become defining terms of subjectivity (Kamboureli 27). One possible reply to concerns about reification is that any sense of ethnicity is bound to be configured differently in a new place because of the inevitable changes that come with displacement: an outward manifestation of this process is the lack of cultural resemblance Toronto’s Little Italy bears today to late-1990s Italy. Taylor has argued that one reason for this discrepancy is that human life is dialogic: it is formed in relation to other people and other customs (“Politics” 32). To use Michael Fischer’s terms, ethnicity is something “reinvented and reinterpreted with each generation by each individual. . . . Ethnicity is not something that is simply passed on from generation to generation, taught and learned; it is something dynamic, often unsuccessfully repressed or avoided” (195)—even by crypto-ethnics, whose avoidance and repression of their ethnicity can go publicly unnoticed.

Some Canadians lament the absence of a syncretic melting-pot ideology that, at least in theory, would aim to transcend difference in the name of national identity. Instead, difference is officially supported. But a major dilemma haunts this form of multiculturalism: how to respect difference without advocating the concepts of ethnic purity and authenticity that have led to civil strife in other parts of the world. Dialogue based on recognition of mutual otherness—that is, on everyone’s ethnicity—is one model for dealing with the unavoidable clashes and penetrations of cultures. It is in the meeting of cultures that ethnicity is lived (see Pivato, Echo 57 and Contrasts 30). As a second-generation Italian Canadian living in a multiracial and multiethnic city, I do not feel at all caught between “the experience of loss and of being othered in a web of old and new cultural registers” (Kamboureli 22); for me ethnicity has much more to do with the process of “inter-reference between two or more cultural traditions” (Fischer 201)—and not only the two whose names I have borne.

In a provocative, even prophetic, essay entitled “A Critique of Pure Pluralism,” Werner Sollors urges that the classification of writers and
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... critics as members of ethnic groups be understood as a “very partial, temporal, and insufficient characterization at best” (256). In arguing instead for a dynamic “transethnic” focus based on the complexities of “polyethnic interaction” (257), he emphasizes the dangers of timidly choosing to speak with the “authority of ethnic insiders rather than that of readers of texts” (256). When Sollors states that “literature [can] become recognizable as a productive force that may Americanize and ethnicize readers” (275), he implies that readers are what they read. Perhaps readers are also how they read, as Gates suggests when he argues that “under the sign of multiculturalism, literary readings are often guided by the desire to elicit, first and foremost, indices of ethnic particularity, especially those that can be construed as oppositional, transgressive, subversive” (“Culture Wars” 8). The influence of ethnicity, like that of race and gender, on the act of interpretation is hotly debated, but like the cultural construction of “nationness,” the cultural construction of ethnicity may also be a “form of social and textual affiliation” (Bhabha, “DissemiNation” 292)—for readers as for writers, since both are formed by being placed in an order of words and both emerge as a function of different and, for some, of conflicting encodings.

Such encodings clashed for me when, as an Italian Canadian, I considered becoming a professional reader and writer. I wondered whether teachers of English inevitably do ethnically English readings. I received my undergraduate education in English literary studies in Canada and therefore largely within the normalizing, ethnocentric context of Leavisite humanism: the immigration of British professors of English had guaranteed that Leavis’s “great tradition” would be my tradition. In other words, I was taught to do what Francis Mulhern calls “English reading.” The realization of this insidious form of crypto-ethnicity—in which the Englishness of English was occulted in favor of the universal—may well be what drove me into Italian studies and finally into comparative literature at the graduate level; it may even have dictated my choice of theory as a research area, for I believed that such a metadiscipline offered me at least a potential means to deconstruct universals. I had a growing awareness that in the academy, as well as in my Italian family, the English constituted a specific ethnic group, not the general culture.

I saw in comparative literature the hope of learning to respect difference as well as encouraging cultural dialogue. That I became a crypto-ethnic at about the same time I chose my field and research area may seem like one of life’s strange ironies. Yet I found losing the marker of my ethnic identity by turns liberating and constricting. In the 1970s the name Hutcheon was a form of protective coloration—I could pass as an English teacher in the ethnic sense—but by the 1990s things had changed considerably. I now find myself living in a culture that officially—by law and in most social and political situations—values difference and views ethnic diversity more with pride than with simple tolerance. The multicultural dynamic in Canada is of course not utopian;
racism and intolerance do not end because of official policies. But in the last twenty years, crypto-ethnicity has ceased to be the protective mask of assimilation it once was, for global as well as local reasons: the poly-ethnic, diasporic world of the 1990s allows for multiple postmodern identities (Buell 214).

Michael Ondaatje’s In the Skin of a Lion, a Canadian novel, offers a striking visual metaphor for crypto-ethnicity in a scene involving an Italian Canadian man evocatively named David Caravaggio. He is in prison for theft when he learns that his name is a carrier of ethnicity, a mobile attractor of scorn and abuse, for he is called “wop” and “dago.” One of his tasks while in prison is to paint the roof of the penitentiary blue—he thereby ironically lives up to his namesake’s profession. As he goes about this job, he realizes that he is losing his sense of the boundaries between blue sky and blue roof. With this realization comes a sense of liberation and empowerment. He not only gains the visual illusion of freedom; in an act of cunning self-cryptography, he has his fellow inmates paint him blue so that the boundaries between himself, the roof, and the sky are erased. Caravaggio then escapes.

There have been such liberating moments for me as a crypto-ethnic, moments when the imprisoning boundaries of purist notions of ethnicity could be challenged merely by being Italian while others thought I was English or Scottish. But this doubleness and its pleasures underlie the reality of Sollors’s interactive “tranethnic” ideal. I know from my daily experience that crypto-ethnicity has established a dynamic (and healthy) tension within me between how I was taught to read and how I now read. And the crypto-ethnic marker I once valued as a protective mask I now appreciate as a reminder of the constructedness of all forms of ethnic identity.

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Notes

1By crypto-ethnicity I mean the situation of immigrants whose family name was changed when they arrived in a new land or women like me who married at a time when social custom meant taking a husband’s surname and who suddenly found more than the nominal marker of their ethnicity altered.

2Cornel West argues that European immigrants arrived in the United States perceiving themselves as Irish or Sicilian and had to learn that they were white “principally by adopting an American discourse of positively-valued Whiteness and negatively-charged Blackness” (29). In Canada the process was not this straightforward because of a smaller black population with a very different history. However, one worry among Canadian scholars of ethnicity is that European ethnic minorities will be homogenized as white.

3The vote was 50.56% against separation; almost 93% of eligible voters cast ballots. Parizeau claimed that the 49.44% who voted for separation represented 60% of Francophones in the province and that therefore the so-called pure laine ‘pure wool’ québécois had indeed voted for independence.
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On the Irremovable Strangeness of Being Different

WHAT are the dialectics of recognition in contemporary cultures of diversity? What are the anomalous, antagonistic, or ambivalent locations of cultural difference in the new world order, and how can they be articulated? And how can an ethical relation be achieved with what Clifford Geertz calls the “irremovable strangenesses” of the “uses” of diversity (120)?

A useful starting point for grappling with these questions is to read Jacques Derrida’s spectral and schematic comments on interethnic wars in the new internationalism, but to read against the grain. In the ten-word telegram in Specters of Marx, on the new world order, Derrida argues that the public sphere is both articulated through and disturbed by “techno-tele-media apparatuses and new rhythms of information and communication” (79). The particular force of these new media, distinctive for their “acceleration” and “dis-location” lies in their capacity to disturb the assumptions of national ontology—the specific conjuncture of identity, location, and location that most commonly defines the particularity of an ethnic culture. In the dislocations of postmodern media, the idea of historical culture and of ethnic affiliation must be conceptualized through a problematic break in the link between “the ontological value of present-being—the political subject or cultural citizen—and its situation in a stable and presentable determination of a locality, the topos of territory, native soil, city . . .” (82). Derrida suggests that these displacements undermine the ontological tendency, for the nation “is rooted first of all in the memory or anxiety of a displaced—or displaceable—population. It is not only time that is out of joint, but space, space in time, spacing” (83). But even more important, racism, community, blood, and borders haunt the new international and have gained remarkable ideological and affective power.

The anxiety of displacement that troubles national rootedness transforms ethnicity or cultural difference into an ethical relation that serves as a subtle corrective to valiant attempts to achieve representativeness and moral equivalence in the matter of minorities. For too often these efforts result in hyphenated attempts to include all multiple subject positions—race, gender, class, geopolitical location, generation—in an overburdened juggernaut that rides roughshod over the singularities and individualizations of difference. I want to articulate a particular relation through Derrida’s thoughts on ethnicity and ontology, but without allowing rootedness to be undermined by the displacement of peoples that structures the national imaginary.
In the narrow passage between rootedness and displacement, when the archaic stability of ontology touches the memory of cultural displacement, cultural difference or ethnic location accedes to a social and psychic anxiety at the heart of identification and its locutions. This passage opens an unsettling space that adjudicates among differences and constructs epistemological boundaries among cultures. As Freud writes, anxiety, like ontology, is an archaic, atavistic “cathexis of longing . . . a defensive reaction to the felt loss (or displacement) of the object” (66). Anxiety keeps visible and present both the moment of birth as a trace and the displaced state and in that sense constitutes a transition where strangeness and contradiction cannot be negated and must be continually negotiated and worked through. Anxiety is a culture’s longing for place and its borderline existence, its objectlessness that does not lack an objective, the mediatory moment between a culture’s ontology and its displacement, the tryst between the phantasm of rootedness and the memory of dissemination.

Anxiety’s asymptotic existence is finely captured in a poem by the Chicago-Mysore writer A. K. Ramanujan entitled “Anxiety”:

Not branchless as the fear tree. . . .
Not geometric as the parabolas
of hope. . . .

Flames have only lungs. Water is all eyes.
The earth has bone for muscle. . . .
But anxiety
can find no metaphor to end it. (11)

Anxiety stands as a frontier post that provides a space of representation, a strategy of reading that “no longer concerns a distancing rendering this or that absent, and then a rapprochement rendering this or that into presence.” In a “laying bare [of] the substitutive structure itself,” the ontology of cultural identity confronts the anxiety and memory of its displacement. This enunciate space is an “overlap without equivalence: fort:da” (Derrida, Post Card 321).

Such a rhetoric (and an analytic) of anxiety is both the symptom and the substance of much influential writing on the ethical ethnography of contemporary cultural difference. In “The Uses of Diversity,” Geertz charges the traditional notion of culture as self-containedness with the estranging, ethical responsibility of encountering diversity and thus engaging with strangeness at the moment of its enunciation. This process “make[s] us visible to ourselves,” Geertz writes, “by representing us and everyone else as cast into the midst of a world full of irremovable strangenesses we can’t keep clear of” (120). The location of this strangeness is not “the distant tribe enfolded upon itself in coherent difference” but a disjunctive, anxious terrain of “sudden faults and dangerous passages”
(117, 119). Because these hazards produce moral asymmetries within a collectivity, strangenesses are more oblique and shaded, less easily set off as anomalies, “scrambled together in ill-defined expanses, social spaces whose edges are unfixed, irregular, and difficult to locate” (121). Geertz splendidly concludes, “Foreignness does not start at the water’s edge but at the skin’s” (112).

And yet Geertz does not fully grasp the amniotic structure of cultural spacing as a temporal movement that crosses cultural boundaries. In his argument, the moral dilemmas arising from cultural diversity are insistently represented through spatial metaphors that constitute “puzzles of judgement.” “[I]ll-defined expanses,” “social spaces whose edges are unfixed,” uneven terrains, “dangerous passages,” clefts, and contours—these are offered as the ethnographic conditions for a new cultural episteme. Geertz’s brilliant spatialization of the contingent, incomplete temporalities of ethical-political enunciation as a landscape of juxtaposed terrains of knowledge installs him in an Archimedian position from which he meditates, “[T]he world is coming at each of its local points to look more like a Kuwaiti bazaar than like an English gentlemen’s club (to instance what, to my mind—perhaps because I have never been in either one of them—are the polar cases)” (121).

In a response to Geertz’s lecture, Richard Rorty largely assents to the idea of diversity as a collage of juxtaposed differences and admits that “[l]ike Geertz, [he has] never been in a Kuwaiti bazaar (nor in an English gentleman’s club)” (533). From the perspective of these resolutely postmodern savants, the “irremovable strangenesses” of diversity suddenly becomes everyday liberal proceduralism. “We can urge the construction of a world order whose model is a bazaar surrounded by lots and lots of exclusive private clubs,” Rorty suggests, as he envisages the postmodern bourgeois liberal ambling between the equivocations of the bazaar and the moral equivalences of the club, “encouraging the diversity of doctrines and the plurality of conflicting and, indeed, incommensurable conceptions of the good” (533, 532).

As a postcolonial native who learned his morals in an Indian bazaar and picked up literature in what some (too hastily) consider an English gentlemen’s club (Oxford), I see the relation between bazaar and club as more agonistic and ambivalent. Between them lies the anxious passage—“overlap without equivalence: fort:da”—to be traversed in the search for truth residing in the encounter between the ontological cultural impulse and the memory of the displacements that make national cultures possible. I take my lesson from A Passage to India, perhaps the greatest of all novels about the complications between oriental bazaars and English clubs:

There is no painting and scarcely any carving in the bazaars. The very wood seems made of mud, the inhabitants of mud moving. So abased, so monotonous is everything that meets the eye, that when the Ganges comes down it
might be expected to wash the excrescence back into the soil. Houses do fall, people are drowned and rotting. . .

. . . On the second rise is laid out the little civil station, and viewed hence Chandrapore appears to be a totally different place. It is a city of gardens. . . . The toddy palms and neem trees and mangoes and pepul that were hidden behind the bazaars now become visible and in their turn hide the bazaars. . . . [T]hey soar above the lower deposit to greet one another with branches and beckoning leaves, and to build a city for the birds. Especially after the rains do they screen what passes below, but at all times . . . they glorify the city to the English people who inhabit the rise, so that new-comers cannot believe it to be as meagre as it is described, and have to be driven down to acquire disillusionment.

(Forster 4-5)

Forster seems to guide the eye from the lowly bazaar to the European club, the civilization on the rise in the city of gardens. But just as he establishes the self-containedness of cultures, the reader becomes aware of the overlapping, oscillating energies of the Ganges that drive everything down and the bird-filled trees that act as a lofty screen for the bazaar. The alienation and anxiety is inscribed in the hidden line of trees that become visible and in turn hide the bazaars. The trees form a boundary that establishes and then displaces the cultural ontology, screening and revealing, enclosing and disclosing. At the same time they provide an essential passage through the cultural divide, standing between oppositions and sowing confusion. These are “the fear tree[s]” of “naked roots and secret twigs. / Not geometric” like parabolas.

Between bazaar and club, the fear tree casts each site of difference as incomplete and therefore makes possible the colonial dialectic of mastery and misrecognition, sexuality and power that creates the narrative. The procedures of “rationalist” rationality (a clarification that Bernard Williams urges) and due process break down irretrievably in both bazaar and club, in courtroom and civil station—the anxious echo of Forster’s Marabar Caves ensures that. But having overcome the anxiety of cultural designation and alienation, the ethical relation seems to return to the private and protected realm. Aziz reconstructs his personal life at home, writing illogical poems on oriental womanhood (although in one poem he bypasses motherhood and motherland and goes “straight to internationality” [Forster 329]). Adela learns the lesson on the surface of her body as a servant removes cactus thorns. In her anxious—some call it hysterical—delirium, she repeats endlessly, “In space things touch, in time things part” (214).

If anxiety reveals a negotiation with the “irremovable strangenesses” of cultural difference, what role do violence, reparation, and historical agency play in the fate of cultural difference within colonial space and historical temporality? Frantz Fanon has famously said in The Wretched of the Earth that “the zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers. The two zones are opposed, but not in the service of a higher unity” (38). Fanon provides an account of colonial
ontology in which there is an “overlap without equivalence: fort:da.” He then derives a revolutionary and reparative ethical position through the strategic affect of psychic and social anxiety. From the splitting and disintegrating of the personality subject to mental illness, he produces some of his notions of social transformation and historical trauma. Psychotic and projective mechanisms that inform the everyday life of the colonized are transmuted into the agency of subaltern action by “lay(ing) hold of this violence which is changing direction” (58). “The native’s challenge to the colonial world is not simply a rational confrontation,” Fanon writes; “it is not a treatise on the universal, but the untidy affirmation of an original idea” (41).

Fanon affirms his ethics of agency by acknowledging the desire for land—for ontological belonging—as the most “concrete symbol of bread and dignity” (44). But in the performative process of revolution as action and agency—the search for equality and freedom—natives discover that their life, breath, and beating hearts are the same as those of settlers: “The Negro is not. Any more than the white man” (Fanon, Black Skins 231). This ethical-political proximity is antagonistic to the Manichaean compartments of the racial divide and sets the scene for the ethics of revolution. In Fanon’s revolutionary creed, “the thing which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself” (Wretched 36–37). However, this “thing” is not simply the colonizer and the colonized. It is the historical relationality, the interstitial in-between that defines and divides them into antagonistic subjects. (From this perspective it would be possible to elaborate the issues of gender and sexuality that Fanon fails to articulate.) The “thing” represents the taking up of a position, as Emmanuel Levinas would say, beyond the ontological consciousness of difference, in relation to the anxiety of a libera tory history whose object remains to be fulfilled. As Fanon explains, decolonization starts for the native with a blank first page on which is inscribed the complete disorder of the desire for decolonization and the continuities of historical transformation of which it is a part. For the colonizer, the possibility of change is also experienced as a terrifying future. The anxious struggle for the historical consciousness of freedom that eschews transcendence—or a higher unity—derives from violence an ethics that takes responsibility for the other in the transformation of the “thing.”

In “On Violence” Fanon insists that the native’s morality is concrete: “it is to silence the settler’s defiance, to break his flaunting violence—in a word to put him out of the picture” (Wretched 44). But this does not represent Fanon’s final position or his sense of ethical reparation. Levinas captures the anxiety of proximity: an ethical relation can exist where subjects are united neither by a synthetic understanding nor by a subject-object relation but where one subject concerns or is meaningful to the other (116).

In the final chapter of The Wretched of the Earth, Fanon produces a credo for the national and international relation:
From the moment you and your like are liquidated like so many dogs you have to retain your importance. . . . You must therefore weigh as heavily as you can upon the body of your torturer in order that his soul, lost in some byway, may find itself once more. . . . And then there is that overwhelming silence—but of course the body cries out—that silence that overwhets the torturer. (295)

Is this plot of proximity a vindication of violence? I do not believe so. But Fanon is suggesting that human subjects can and must wage wars of recognition in the knowledge that historical freedom and cultural survival exist in the midst of antagonism. Overwhelm the torturer's silence, and heed the body's cry! The proximity of bodies at the edge of water and skin and in the transfer of ethical weight from the white man's eyes to the tortured black man's body marks the possibility of a kind of freedom. This is a freedom that does not demand universal frames or synchronous knowledges but that will allow the silence to inscribe the raveling and unraveling between the psychic body and its political weight.

Works Cited

Jewish Cricket

G. BOSE, an early disciple of Freud and the founder of psychoanalysis in India, once sent Freud a depiction of an English gentleman, remarking that he imagined Freud resembled the image. Freud responded that this comment ignored certain “racial” differences between him and the English. Freud’s origins as an Ostjude crossed his aspirations as a bourgeois European. He was both the object and the subject of racism at the same time. From the perspective of the colonized, Freud might look like a white man; from his own perspective, as from the dominating white Christian’s, he was a Jew, every bit as racially marked as an Indian. Many critics, however, miss the pathos and desperation of Freud’s colonial mimicry.

At the end of Moses and Monotheism, immediately after the discourse on the great man as Aryan father, Freud makes the following statement:

Why the people of Israel, however, clung more and more submissively to their God the worse they were treated by him—that is a problem which for the moment we must leave on one side. It may encourage us to enquire whether the religion of Moses brought the people nothing else besides an enhancement of their self-esteem owing to their consciousness of having been chosen. And indeed another factor can easily be found. That religion also brought the Jews a far grander conception of God, or, as we might put it more modestly, the conception of a grander God. Anyone who believed in this God had some kind of share in his greatness, might feel exalted himself. For an unbeliever this is not entirely self-evident; but we may perhaps make it easier to understand if we point to the sense of superiority felt by a Briton in a foreign country which has been made insecure owing to an insurrection—a feeling that is completely absent in a citizen of any small continental state. For the Briton counts on the fact that his Government will send along a warship if a hair of his head is hurt, and that the rebels understand that very well—whereas the small state possesses no warship at all. Thus, pride in the greatness of the British Empire has a root as well in the consciousness of the greater security—the protection—enjoyed by the individual Briton. This may resemble the conception of a grand God.

The Jew is the epitome of the citizen of the small state with no warships and indeed “he” is not a citizen of any particular state. Freud is arguing that the Jews’ “grander [more sublime] conception of God” as their sublimation (masculinization) of physicality and desire provides them with an alternative to the warships and state power that they do not possess. After this encomium to imperial power, Freud invokes the prohibition against making images of God as a sign of the “triump of Geistigkeit over sensuality, or, strictly speaking, an instinctual renunciation” (112)—characteristics encoded as sublime, male, and Protestant in Freud’s cultural
world (see Boyarin 244–70). Symptomatically, Freud goes on to write of “our children, adults who are neurotic, and primitive peoples” and of the succession of the matriarchal social order by the patriarchal one. The connections between these expressions are clear, but it is vital to remember that it was the Jews who were branded as neurotic in fin de siècle central Europe.

Freud’s claims for the superiority of the Jews are closely related to his recoding of submissiveness as masculine rather than feminine. By reading the “inclination to intellectual interests” as a result of the dematerialization or sublimation of God, Freud brilliantly asserts that the Jewish male, by circumcision and by devotion to interior, “feminine” studies, is more masculine than the muscular Greek, who is less restrained, less able to “renounce instincts” (115, 116), and thus paradoxically is less “male” than the Jew.

This masculinity is bolstered by the infamous analogy that Freud draws between “declaring that our God is the greatest and mightiest, although he is invisible like a gale of wind or like the soul,” and “deciding that paternity is more important than maternity, although it cannot, like the latter, be established by the evidence of the senses” (118). Freud thus seeks to reinvest the Jews with the phallus in an almost pathetic quest for the “self-regard” (116) that the nineteenth-century “emancipated” Jew of Austro-Germany lacked. Like other Jews of his time and place, Freud compensates for the absence of an asset prohibited to Jews.

In a recent reading of this passage, Gayatri Spivak confounds Jewish desire for the European phallus with Jewish possession of it. In a section of her essay entitled somewhat ominously “Arabs and Jews” (54), she establishes a binary opposition between the Magrebi writer Abdelkébir Khatibi (the Arab) and the French Lacanian Daniel Sibony (the Jew). Ultimately, however, the Jew is Sigmund Freud and thus in some sense Moses, the originator of monotheistic universal cultural imperialism, and in Spivak’s text Sibony, the French Lacanian, is only his stand-in. The Jew, for Spivak, is simply the same as the European white man, the colonialist, and indeed in a sense the progenitor of his predation.2

The crucial move in Spivak’s argument is her characterization of Sibony as “shifting the lines from two Peoples of the Book to an opposition which reflects the vicissitudes of the long losing streak of the by-now lesser team: Arab against French.” Thus Spivak binds Sibony “the Jewish Franco-Maghrebin” with Martine Medejel, “a Gauloise married to a Moroccan” (55). Both Sibony and Medejel indeed represent themselves as French vis-à-vis a non-French other, yet Sibony, who was born in North Africa and who bears a distinctly North African and Jewish name, is no more French than Medejel’s husband. Nevertheless, in Spivak’s discussion of the treatment in France (allegedly by Sibony) of an aphonic three-year-old boy of North African Muslim origin, “Sibony is the well-placed male migrant helping cure the problems of underclass migrants. His hold on the Frenchness of French society may be minimally more
secure because of his Jewishness, although there are plenty of historical ironies behind this claim” (56). There are more than historical ironies here, for although Sibony is certainly a “well-placed male migrant,” many North African Jews in France are not male or well-placed, and there are North African Muslims in France who are as well placed as Sibony is (and just as male). Spivak assumes that Sibony is indeed the “well-placed” Jewish therapist who treats the underclass Arab boy. Sibony, however, is not the therapist; he is commenting on the work of “un thérapeute de langue arabe” ‘an Arabic-speaking therapist’ who treated the boy “et fort bien” ‘and very well’ (Sibony 83). However familiar, the opposition between Arab and Jew that Spivak sets up is false. Sibony has just as much right to the identification Arab as the patient does (see Alkalay). A bit of “fieldwork” in Belleville would make my point better than words will.

To be sure, the rhetoric of Sibony’s essay seems to identify him with Frenchness, a move redolent of Freud’s assumption of Englishness. Insofar as Sibony himself insists that the contact is between Arabic and French, rejects the possibility of hybridity, and insists that his own Arabic identity be left behind, he engages in the same process of self-erasure, of mimicry, as Freud does in his attempts to appropriate the universal phallus for Jews and to make them full members of the brotherhood of the universal spirit. Spivak forecloses the possibility of Sibony’s and Freud’s pain and dislocation, of a postcolonial anguish as vivid in its repression as Khatibi’s or her own.3

Sibony seems not to care that the so-called country of origin has a different mode of existence today, elsewhere. It is not simply his past and the past of his patients. He seems to ignore that the cutting of the graft is also the death of the host, the loss of a language, that if the “country of origin” is considered as alibi but not in illo tempore, circumcision is not sublating a prehistoric castration in these cases.

(56)

Another misreading occurs when Spivak comments on Sibony’s description of his boyhood in a djamaâ, an Islamic school, in the Maghreb. The teacher refers to the “Sacrifice of Ishmael” as a radical act, and Sibony comments that he ignores the fact that this is “une modulation intéressante de sa version originale dite sacrifice d’Isaac et écrite 15 siècles plus tôt” “an interesting modulation of the original version, which is called the sacrifice of Isaac and which was written fifteen centuries earlier” (88). For Spivak this comment is a sign of Sibony’s “visible tie with the universalizing Father who is the Subject of Science”—that is, with Freud. But the struggle over the sacrifice of Isaac or Ishmael is not between universalizing subjects of science and natives but between Arab Jews and Muslims—both very particular natives. (For Frenchmen it is irrelevant.) Sibony is not the Frenchman here but the North African Jew. And although the language of the scientific is a marker of a desire for universality, the subject (sujet) marks himself as of the Maghreb.
Circumcision is not merely a “male bond” between Sibony and the boy (Spivak 58) but a graft between Jew and Muslim and a cut between both of them and France. As Jonathan Boyarin has noted (58–59), in Albert Memmi’s autobiographical novel The Pillar of Salt, the narrator, a Jew growing up in Tunis in the 1930s, describes being on a streetcar with various characters—a Bedouin, a Frenchwoman, a “Mohammedan” and his two-and-a-half-year-old son, and a Djerban grocer. The grocer begins a socially accepted form of teasing, asking the little boy whether he has been circumcised yet and offering successively higher bids for his “little animal,” eventually snatching at the child’s groin in mock frustration and provoking the boy’s real terror. This episode brings the narrator back to a remembered scene in his kouttab school (the North African counterpart of the East European heder). In the teacher’s absence, the class followed an anarchic impulse: the students “felt that [they] needed one another and discovered that [they] were a crowd . . . [then] soon returned to ancestral traditions and decided to play, like adults, at circumcision.” They chose one of the younger boys as the victim and carried out a mock circumcision, acting the roles of their fathers and their future selves, until the victim burst out crying and they all collapsed into helpless laughter. The scene from his school, in which the narrator simultaneously identified with the victim and was thrilled to be part of the crowd performing the sacrifice, allows him an imaginative identification with the Muslim child in the trolley who, unlike a Jewish infant, will in fact be aware of the cut to be made on his body. The sentences that link the two parts of the chapter confirm this association: “Can I ever forget the Orient? It is deeply rooted in my flesh and blood, and I need but touch my own body to feel how I have been marked for all time by it. As though it were all a mere matter of cultures and of elective affinities!” (169). Memmi is both postulating an Orient from a position outside it and identifying with it. He is asserting as a link to fellow “Orientals” what is usually taken to be exclusively Jewish, rendering the ironies in Sibony’s situation all the more palpable.

Spivak’s misreading of Sibony generates or is generated by her mis-taking of Freud. Sibony, like Freud, is in between. He also, less eloquently than Memmi and certainly than Khatibi, evokes an Orient from a position outside it and simultaneously identifies with it. Spivak produces a brilliant metaphor in her discussion of French cricket, an appropriation by colonized children of the English game. Both girls and boys can play French cricket, and “the wickets [are] stable, usually subtropical trees” (60). French cricket is a peculiar set of parodic, shifting appropriations of the culture of the metropolis. However, like Memmi, Jews have always played their own forms of French cricket, inhabiting the interstices between the colonizer and the colonized and seen by both as the other. Memmi plays Jewish cricket. Spivak, who misreads Freud (and Sibony) like a latter-day Bose, discounts the “racial difference” between the Jew and the European, even when the Jew is an Arab Jew seeking his own Frenchness.
Instead of being universal, the Jews once were—maybe still are—trying to become universal after millennia of standing for difference, of being embarrassingly visible. Freud’s other ethnological texts, *Totem and Taboo* (1912–13) and *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), can be read as symptomatic of his desire for an unambivalent whiteness, not as the transparent signifier of such whiteness. Like many other symptoms, they are unpleasant indeed. Reading these texts symptomatically does not defuse or excuse their racist import but may help bracket it within a critical evaluation of what remains useful for projects of cultural therapeutics. This perspective does not explain away or deny the triumphalism or racism, but it does help to frame them in a different historical context. Defense and apologetic as types of mimicry are dangerously close to triumphalism, and identification with oppressors always produces oppression. However, the observation that the terms of the apologetic are drawn from the value system of a dominating culture, a system internalized by the dominated, is profoundly relevant to an understanding of textual and historical processes.

“Freud had certainly assumed an implicit identity for the analyst as a white European man,” Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks writes (194), an assertion with which I can only agree. I would interpret this sentence, however, in a sense that was perhaps unintended by its author but that nevertheless resides in the syntax: Freud certainly assumed (put on) an identity (mask) for the analyst (himself, cast as off-white, Jewish, effeminate) as a white European man. It is not difficult to see why victims of British imperialism (such as Spivak)—the “rebels”—might read this passage differently. Freud sought to escape the characterization of his people as feminine and accomplished this aim by stigmatizing others. To dodge the stigmatization of Jews as weak and submissive, Freud insisted that Judaism is masculine and aggressive. And when Spivak remarks somewhat acerbically, “Transcendental imperialism by this Freudian account is a Jewish game accidentally played by the British” (60), she recognizes that this Freudian claim is a form of colonial mimicry, since she is explicitly alluding to Ashis Nandy’s remark “Cricket is an Indian game accidentally discovered by the English” (1). And yet Spivak leaves a tantalizing ambiguity about whether or not she accepts Freud’s argument here. For the Jews no more invented “transcendental imperialism” than the Indians or the Jamaicans invented cricket.

Notes

1Seshadri-Crooks 185. On Bose in general, Seshadri-Crooks is illuminating.

2When I questioned Spivak about using Khatibi and Sibony as stand-ins for their respective peoples, she denied that allegorization was her intent. I continue to find it difficult to
interpret her text any other way. In the narrative one Arab (Khatibi) interacts with a Jew (Freud), and one Jew (Sibony) interacts with an Arab boy; thus the title “Arabs and Jews” certainly seems to give an archetypal status to these interactions if not quite to their actors.

3Spivak writes that these feelings are anointed with a “different hybridity,” while Sibony gets only the dubious distinction of “a privileged access to a secure Frenchness” (67).

4In Spivak’s terms, do Jews play English or French cricket? A note suggests that she in fact agrees with Freud: “This is not an argument for a similarity between the British and the Jews. (The two are not, of course, mutually exclusive.) It is an analogy between the enduring spirit of imperialism of the Eighteenth Dynasty of Egypt, carried forward by the Jews’ contact to the culture of that imperialism through Moses’s governorship and the spirit of the British Empire. As we shall see in the case of Fanon, it is an argument for cricketers” (72n55). But what is the point of this analogy if the Freudian account is only a fiction? The notion in the Freudian account that universalism is a product of imperialist power seems to me sound, or at any rate plausible. However, ancient Hebrew monotheism is not transcendental or universalist in its claims; it assumes those traits only when temporal power is added to the mix in the latest avatars of the Roman Empire (Boyarin and Boyarin).

Works Cited


How Ethnic Am I?

Jemand mußte Josef K. verleumdet haben, denn ohne daß er etwas Böses getan hätte, wurde er eines Morgens verhaftet.

Someone must have traduced Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning.

Franz Kafka, Der Proceß (The Trial)

ONE FINE MORNING I found myself called on to confess my “German” ethnicity. My response, naturally, was to go looking for an exit. Yet such escapes, as one learns from reading Kafka, are not easy to come by. Could I deny the charge, dispute its presuppositions, have someone testify in my favor, or—extravagant hope—even produce an alibi? Of course, I could argue that my ancestors were not so much German as Swabian, Prussian, Danish, and even (yet more distantly and legendarily) Italian and Spanish. Or I could seek refuge in, for instance, Jacques Roubaud’s efficient deconstruction of provable ethnic origin in “Is Le Pen French?” Roubaud considers the implications of Jean-Marie Le Pen’s definition of a French person as someone whose parents are both French:

Si Le Pen était français, selon la définition de Le Pen, cela voudrait dire que, selon la définition de Le Pen, la mère de Le Pen et le père de Le Pen auraient été eux-mêmes français selon la définition de Le Pen, ce qui signifierait que, selon la définition de Le Pen, la mère de la mère de Le Pen, ainsi que le père de la mère de Le Pen ainsi que la mère du père de Le Pen, sans oublier le père du père de Le Pen auraient été, selon la définition de Le Pen, français et par conséquent la mère de la mère de la mère de Le Pen, ainsi que celle du père de la mère de Le Pen ainsi que celle de la mère du père de Le Pen, et celle du père du père de Le Pen auraient été français selon la définition de Le Pen et de la même manière pour la même raison le père de la mère de la mère de Le Pen, ainsi que celui du père de la mère de Le Pen ainsi que celui de la mère du père de Le Pen, et que celui du père du père de Le Pen auraient été français, toujours selon la même définition, celle de Le Pen.

d’où on déduira sans peine et sans l’aide de Le Pen en poursuivant le raisonnement

ou bien qu’il y a une infinité de français qui sont nés français selon la définition de Le Pen, ont vécu et sont morts français selon la définition de Le Pen depuis l’aube du commencement des temps ou bien

que Le Pen n’est pas français selon la définition de Le Pen. (15–16)

If Le Pen were French according to the definition of Le Pen, this would mean, according to the definition of Le Pen, that Le Pen’s mother and Le Pen’s father would themselves have been French according to the definition of Le Pen, which would mean, according to the definition of Le Pen, that Le Pen’s mother’s mother, as well as Le Pen’s mother’s father and Le Pen’s father’s mother, without forgetting Le Pen’s father’s father, would have been French,
according to the definition of Le Pen, and consequently the mother of Le Pen’s mother’s mother, as well as that of Le Pen’s mother’s father, as well as that of Le Pen’s father’s mother and that of Le Pen’s father’s father, also would have been French according to the definition of Le Pen, and in the same way and for the same reasons the father of Le Pen’s mother’s mother, as well as that of Le Pen’s mother’s father, as well as that of Le Pen’s father’s mother and that of Le Pen’s father’s father, would have been French, still according to the same definition, the one by Le Pen from which, by continuing the reasoning, one may deduce without trouble and without the help of Le Pen either that there is an infinity of French people who since the dawn of the beginning of time were born French according to the definition of Le Pen, lived and died French according to the definition of Le Pen, or else that Le Pen is not French according to the definition of Le Pen.¹

But even if Roubaud were authoritative as a witness and even if I could temporarily gain some ground with his help, wouldn’t my motives for trying to make an escape be questioned? Wouldn’t the very impulse to escape be taken to confirm my guilt?

In postwar (West) Germany, “being German” was not something one went around doing in public. The proclamation and elaboration of national, racial, or ethnic identity in general—and of Germanness in particular—had all the wrong associations. Any categorization of people by such means was tainted and deeply suspect both politically and ethically. On the basis of such evidence, I could now expect my very hesitation to perform “as a German” to be diagnosed as the most quintessentially German thing about me. My continued resistance would merely suggest that the guilt might be even greater than at first suspected.

In the postdeconstructive context of the 1990s, the practice of elaborating ethnic and other sorts of cultural and group identities has become popular once again. And yet after deconstruction, ethnicity can no longer be a truth. It must be something constructed, potentially multiple, hybridized, and interstitial. Werner Sollors’s use of the word invention in the title of his book The Invention of Ethnicity indicates this change:

By calling ethnicity—that is, belonging and being perceived by others as belonging to an ethnic group—an “invention,” one signals an interpretation in a modern and a postmodern context. (xiii)

If I am uncomfortable under ethnic “arrest,” Sollors’s relation to the “postmodern context” seems not altogether untroubled either: he perceives it as an “assault”:

Is it possible to take the postmodern assault seriously and yet to adhere to some notion of history and of individual and collective life in the modern world? (xi)

In the absence of a credible theory that would uphold the claims of referentiality, the meaning of these inventions slips and threatens to
disappear. In response to this problem, Sollors offers a redefined concept of ethnicity:

[E]thnicity is not so much a deep-seated force surviving from the historical past, but rather the modern and modernizing feature of a contrasting strategy. . . . It marks an acquired modern sense of belonging that replaces visible, concrete communities. . . . It is not a thing but a process—and it requires constant detective work from readers. (xiv–xv)

Sollors shifts the meaning from actual communities that constructions of ethnicity could still designate to the activity of subjects who desire to belong to such communities. Ethnicity is transformed from something one is into something one does.

But what if one had acquired not a “modern sense of belonging” but rather a desire not to belong—or at least a desire to keep open the possibility of not belonging as an emergency exit through which one could give the (always potentially overeager) detectives the slip? The idea of ethnicity would move from a model of acknowledgment or denial of a (more or less obvious) truth to a choice between two modes of and two desires in reading. Sollors’s redefinition thus also makes room for the possibility of choosing not to belong—an option I consider indispensable. For only the option of doing otherwise can prevent the invention from becoming essentially indistinguishable from the old notion of inescapable truth with all its attendant horrors.

The experience of being at home has as its uneasy but necessary complement the experience of being a foreigner.2 In 1977, as an undergraduate, I spent my first year abroad, at a university in Ohio. Many students there casually mentioned that they were “German” too. Yet I also knew that I was the only student from Germany on that campus of fourteen thousand. When I attended in close succession a reading by Elie Wiesel and a student performance of Cabaret, my sense of my strange singularity intensified. Both events seemed to single me out from the whole large audience as their unique addressee. I suddenly saw myself as an isolated, spotlighted point in a darkened room filled with a mass of people that seemed inert and unreal.

If this was a moment of essentialism, according to which I felt that I was the only “genuine German” among the students on that campus and the only addressee of those performances, the sensation was hardly a comfortable one. Nor was it one that made me feel in any way at home in a community. If one interprets that moment as one that founded an identity, that identity was the exact opposite of a collective one. And if the moment was about being “German,” it was not about being ethnically so. At such a moment, rather, one is beyond language—both utterly exposed and completely invisible, both central to significance and mute, fallen out of any signifying order. One is simultaneously the only accused and the only judge. The works of Franz Kafka and Ingeborg Bachmann bear traces of events of this sort.
Kafka’s Joseph K. grows more and more exhausted in the course of his trial. Most of the time, he still makes distinctions carefully, but there are moments when he must take a break on the divan in his office. In a passage Kafka deleted, Joseph K. lapses into half sleep, and the distinctions between those who are connected to the court and those who are not blur:

[...]er im Halbschlaf mischten sich alle, er vergaß dann ... die große Arbeit des Gerichtes, ihm war als sei er der einzige Angeklagte und alle andern gingen durcheinander wie Beamte und Juristen auf den Gängen eines Gerichtsgebäudes, noch die stumpfsinnigsten hatten das Kinn zur Brust gesenkt, die Lippen aufgestülpt und den starren Blick verantwortungsvollen Nachdenkens.

(348–49)

Here in this half sleep they all got mixed up: he forgot the great work of the court; he felt as if he were the only accused and all others were mingling like the officials and lawyers in the corridors of a courthouse, even the dullest had their chins lowered to their chests, their lips pursed, and wore the rigid gaze of responsible thought.

The neglect of the necessary distinctions leads Joseph K. from the feeling that he is “the only accused” to a “breakthrough” in which he suddenly emerges on the side of the judges. The side of the judges, however, is a forbidden place for Joseph K. The Trial could not have continued with Joseph K. in the role of a judge. Thus Kafka censored the passage, re-established the distinction, and rescued his novel.3

Whereas Kafka’s novel maintains the perspective of the accused, Bachmann’s story “Ein Wildermuth” explores the situation of a judge obliged to try a murderer whose last name is the same as his own. As the trial proceeds, the judge grows increasingly restless “weil er seinen Namen immer wieder lesen mußte als den eines Fremden” “because he had to read his name again and again as that of a stranger” (217–18):

Und sein Name war hier in einem üblen Märchen. ... Die Vorkommnisse, die in die Akten geschrieben waren, hatten ihn sonst nie derart bewegt. Nie jedenfalls hatte er gefragt, wie zu einem Namen ein Mord, ein zertrümmertes Auto, eine Unterschlagung, ein Ehebruch kamen. Es war ihm selbstverständlich, daß Namen davon Kunde gaben und daß Vorfälle sich mit jenen Namen zusammentaten, an denen man Angeklagte und Zeugen erkennen konnte. (218–19)

And here his name was part of a nasty tale. ... The incidents written into the files had never before moved him like this. Never, at any rate, had he wondered how a name came to be associated with a murder, a smashed car, an embezzlement, an adultery. It was self-evident to him that names gave information about such things and that incidents got together with those names by which one could recognize defendants and witnesses.

As in Kafka’s fragmented chapter, the difference between the accused and the judges collapses, and with it crumbles the self-evidence of names, the possibility of articulating truth by means of language and thus
of reaching a definitive and intelligible verdict. In the course of the trial, the murderer tries too hard to confess—and succeeds only in making the story more and more untellable. Finally the prosecutor calls the lost assembly back to reality “mit seiner schneidenden Stimme” ‘with his cutting voice’ (225). At that moment the judge screams, and from then on he is unfit to practice his profession.

Er las die Berichte und Stellungnahmen, kannte sie bald auswendig, versuchte, wie ein Unbeteiligter, die Geschichte in sich zu erzeugen und dann in sich zu zerschlagen, die man für die Öffentlichkeit aus dem Vorfall gemacht hatte. Er allein wußte ja, daß keine Geschichte sich aus den Elementen fügen und kein Sinnzusammenhang sich vorzeigen ließ, sondern daß nur einmal ein sichtbarer Unfall verursacht worden war durch den Einschlag des Geistes in seinen Geist, der nicht taugte, mehr anzurichten in der Welt als eine kurze kopflose Verwirrung. (215)

He read the reports and opinions, soon knew them by heart, tried as if he were uninvolved to create inside himself and then to smash to pieces inside himself the story that had been made of the event for the public. He alone, after all, knew that no story could be forged and no meaningful connection demonstrated but that a visible accident had been caused only once through the impact of the spirit on his spirit, which was not fit to cause any greater havoc in the world than a short, panicked confusion.

What happens to the judge yields no story and no judgment. His silence merely marks the site of an impact, a place where something has fallen out of language, where something defies any attempt to forge a story about it.

In the events that disrupt Kafka’s novel and that occasion the silence of Bachmann’s judge, a moment of self-reflexivity makes a hole in language. Kafka’s novel reasserts itself against that event, whereas Bachmann’s story insists on it. After the incident, the judge-accused lives with and in those moments of incommensurability that defy language’s referential grip. This is a subject that maintains not the distinctions but the exit, the kind of subject Julia Kristeva advocates in “Women’s Time”:

This process could be summarized as an interiorization of the founding separation of the socio-symbolic contract, as an introduction of its cutting edge into the very interior of every identity whether subjective, sexual, ideological, or so forth. This in such a way that the habitual and increasingly explicit attempt to fabricate a scapegoat victim as foundress of a society or a counter-society may be replaced by the analysis of the potentialities of victim/executioner which characterize each identity, each subject, each sex. (210)

The potentialities of this victim-executioner or judge-accused are those of a subject that knows it will not be able to confess its identity in a name.

Names that signal ethnicity (like all other names and like language in general) acquire or fail to acquire significance—casually, ironically, cat-
astrophically—depending on whether or not (and how) people read one another and themselves in terms of such names. The comfort names provide for some and the dangers they pose for others grow proportionally with the “self-evident” faith “that names [give] information . . . and that incidents [get] together with those names by which one [can] recognize defendants and witnesses.” Inversely, inventions of ethnicity can be more cheerfully indulged the less seriously they take themselves. However, the scene of the crime, of mortification and arrest, is located elsewhere. And elsewhere, too, is the potential for laughter and for making a getaway.

“Yes, I am German too,” those students in Ohio used to say. And I too am happy to say these words occasionally. But in those moments, they mean almost nothing. An English translation of the Latin alibi is “elsewhere.” I have found my alibi.

Notes

I would like to thank Jean-Jacques Poucel for helping me locate and translate this text. All other translations are my own.

2See Rosi Braidotti on this issue: “Cultural identity being external and retrospective, the most immediate effect of the Australian experience was to make me discover the depth of my Europeanness, which was far from a simple notion or a single experience. Not only was I a white immigrant, when compared to the aborigines but also I was off-white (a ‘wog,’ or a ‘dago’) when compared to the Anglo-Australian minority who ran the country. . . . It was by opposition to the antipodean psyche and cultural identity that I found out, often at my own expense, that I am, indeed, a European. I often wonder whether this awareness would have been so acute had I not experienced the loss of European roots through migration. Can cultural identity emerge from an internal dynamic, or is it always external, that is to say oppositional?” (9).

3For a more detailed reading along these lines of The Trial as well as The Castle, see Götz, chs. 4 and 5.

Works Cited