THE QUESTION OF OTHERS:
REFLECTIONS ON ANTHROPOLOGY
AND THE ‘JEWISH QUESTION’

Fiona Wright*

Abstract

In this essay I interrogate the place of the ‘Jewish Question’ in contemporary anthropology, based on ethnographic research conducted with Jewish Israeli non- and anti-Zionist left-wing activists. I engage with Jonathan Boyarin’s proposal for ‘Jewish ethnography’ (Boyarin 1996b) via reflections on the ways in which anthropology has failed to incorporate ‘Jewish theory’ as a theoretical other of its disciplinary premises. Exploring the ironies of Israeli activists’ artistic and leisure practices, I argue that there is an ambivalent self-mockery at the heart of their attachments to Jewishness. I analyse this with reference to the theories of Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, and Emmanuel Levinas, who have similarly placed in question the stability of ‘Jewish identity’, and thus what it might mean to do ‘Jewish theory’, in relation to histories of European racism and colonialism. Ultimately I place in question the ideas of both ‘Jewish ethnography’ and ‘Jewish theory’ with a critical perspective on how Jews are seen to present a problematic otherness for anthropology not similarly conceptualised vis-à-vis other ‘Others’.

Keywords: Jewishness, otherness, ethnography, Israel/Palestine, Levinas, subjectivity

As though the foreigner were first of all the one who puts the first question or the one to whom you address the first question. As though the foreigner were being-in-question, the very question of being-in-question, the question-being or being-in-question of the question. But also the one who, putting the first question, puts me in question.

(Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000: 3)

* I am grateful to Yael Navaro-Yashin, as well as the Jewish Journal of Sociology editor Keith Kahn-Harris and two anonymous reviewers, for comments on various drafts of this paper. This research was carried out with the support of an ESRC 1+3 doctoral research studentship held at the Division of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge.

The Jewish Journal of Sociology, vol 56, nos, 1 and 2, 2014

48
Derrida’s questioning of the question, and of those that put it to us, evokes ‘the Foreigner’ in ways that recall what has also frequently been made of the figure, or the question, perhaps, of ‘the Jew’. It is the allegorized Jew that signifies foreignness, exile, diaspora, and discomfort. Questioning Jews is indeed what Virginia Dominguez called her review article that wondered whether anthropology has a ‘Jewish problem’ – a problem with the Jew/s that arises from the way in which its/their murky status (foreigner or citizen? coloniser or colonised?) complicates our questions (Dominguez 1993), and indeed, puts our questions, puts us, in question. Why is it that the Jew, like the Foreigner, should so trouble anthropology? In particular, how does a discipline that is founded on a methodology of identifying otherness, perhaps even an epistemology of otherness, struggle so much with this particular other?

In this paper I explore these questions partly out of a sense of necessity in relation to my ethnography of Jewish Israeli left-wing activism, as the ‘Jewish question’ continues to haunt any discussion of Israeli ethics and politics. During fieldwork research I conducted with Jewish Israeli radical left-wing activists from various organisations in Israel/Palestine between November 2009 and May 2011, I found a pervasive sense of discomfort with attempts either to fix what Jewishness was or should represent for my interlocutors, or to erase from view the emplacement of their ethico-politics within their specifically Jewish/(Israeli) backgrounds and contemporary context. Indeed this discomfort echoed some of the reflections offered by Jonathan Boyarin in his call for a ‘Jewish ethnography’ (J. Boyarin 1996b), as a critical stance both on the reproduction of certain culturalist tropes in anthropology’s central methodological practice, and on the nature of contemporary Israeli politics and its totalistic and exclusionary rendering of Jewishness. Thus in what follows I consider Boyarin’s proposed model of ‘Jewish ethnography’ but also question it through probing certain other contributions that may also be considered ‘Jewish theory’. Finding their alternative formulations of the significance of reflections on Jewish identity, and the kinds of ethico-politics that an engagement with such questions might produce, I suggest caution in the drive to fix as a cultural or methodological model the idea of Jewishness, even one reclaimed from its Zionist formulations. In this way I also move from the specific reflection on the ‘Jewish question’ to a more general consideration of how anthropology conceptualises otherness.

Specifically, I trace in my ethnography of Jewish Israeli left-wing activists’ ironic cultural practices, shadows of Levinasian ethics, as well
as its elaborations by Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida. Rather than reproducing in these connections the idea that Emmanuel Levinas is a ‘Jewish thinker/philosopher’, as some demand, or even a ‘theologian’, a theorist only of ‘Jewish ethics’, I ask what such a move to categorise theory, as well as ethnography, does to our capacity to offer an anthropological analysis. I question the implication that somehow ‘Jewish theory’ is too particular(ist), not part of the universal canon of Western philosophy, which would legitimise its introduction into a broader theoretical discussion that goes beyond the specific case or ethnographic interest with which it is being brought into relation. Further, I highlight the essentialising undertone of this charge, as it asks, does this ‘Jewish theory’ only work, analytically, in relation to an analysis of ‘Jewish ethnography’, or an ethnography of Jews? This paper interrogates this challenge, and its idea of ‘Jewish theory’, via some reflections on ‘Jewish ethnography’. In thus considering the interface between theory and ethnography, I also write between the two. Whilst presenting some ethnographic material in conventional fashion as the basis for a distinct analytical interpretation, mostly this article builds upon a back and forth between observations from the field and readings of theorists that mirror the ethico-political practices of Israeli activists, such that ethnography and theory are not intended to be read separately. Indeed part of my critique of Boyarin’s model of ‘Jewish ethnography’ is that it furthers a distinction between empirical and theoretical work through which the historical production of both is concealed from view. In this paper, rather, the echoes of scholarly critiques in activist practices, and vice versa, allow a different conceptualisation and practice of Jewishness to emerge that questions its stable delimitation in either theoretical or ethnographic terms.

In the first section, then, I reflexively introduce my fieldwork experience and the ways in which I, as a non-Jewish ethnographer, came to reflect on the ‘Jewish question’ in very particular ways. This positioning of both self and other is presented in dialogue with both Jonathan Boyarin and his idea of ‘Jewish ethnography’, and the work of Virginia Dominguez, whose self-reflection on her non-Jewish identity whilst conducting research in Israel helpfully clarifies the distinctions between and among the approaches taken by Dominguez, Boyarin, and myself. The second section of this paper introduces Jewish Israeli left-wing activists’ cultural engagements with what Boyarin calls Yiddishkayt. Here I observe how activists’ ironic and critical reformulations of notions of exile and diaspora put into question Boyarin’s model of reclaiming diaspora for ‘Jewish ethnography’. Following activists’ highlighting the problematic nature of such reclamations of identity, in the third section I
elaborate on those Levinasian theoretical contributions that may similarly furnish us with both an alternative understanding of the ethico-politics of Jewishness, and a critique of identity politics more broadly. Finally, I reflect on post-colonial writing addressing the historical roots of the ‘Jewish question’ in order to place in critical context the emergence of both ‘Jewish theory’ and ‘Jewish ethnography’ as resources for anthropologists and other scholars. Given the ways in which both ‘ethnography’ and ‘theory’ will be shown in this paper to question the rendering of Jewishness as a cultural or methodological model, I suggest that we retain the unease and the traces of absence that the question of Jewishness, or the ‘Jewish question’, reveals.

*Self and Other*

Perhaps an apt place to start is with the admission that over the course of eighteen months of fieldwork research in Israel, I never found a way of answering the question of whether I was Jewish or not with which I felt comfortable. My discomfort lay not only in the fact that I was not Jewish, and had no known family genealogy that could potentially explain my interest in Israel and Jewish ethics. Rather it was also an anticipation of and reaction to my sense that the question itself was rarely asked easily or freely – it was posed to me, very often, as an apology as much as a question. ‘I’m sorry to ask, but…’ was almost always the phrasing that opened the question, even as both I and my interlocutors saw it as an inevitable and legitimate one. Sometimes, and mostly when those with whom I was in conversation were not leftist activists but other Israelis, this was not the case and there was no embarrassment or shame conveyed in the asking, but this was uncommon. In the question-as-apology of activists who saw themselves as opposing violence, racism, and oppression, there was something of a discomfort with the need to know, with the fact that it makes a difference whether someone is or is not a Jew as the relation with her is formed. The fact of difference, we might say, and in particular of Jewish difference, and its perceived relation to those political realities activists sought to oppose, was a source of unease, for both ethnographer and her interlocutors.

My fieldwork experience thus posed an additional challenge to what Jonathan Boyarin has proposed as a model for anthropological methodology and theory in general, that of ‘Jewish ethnography’. Boyarin’s intellectual project, often writing with his brother Daniel Boyarin, who works within and among Talmudic studies, gender and queer studies, and the history of religion, traces an ethnography of Jews
and Judaism, including some work based in Israel/Palestine, as a series of reflections on how the Jewish textual tradition, alongside histories of othering, exile and persecution, as well as Zionism and Israeli colonialism, inflect contemporary experiences of Jewishness and formulations of Jewish ethics (J. Boyarin 1992, 1996a, 1996b, D. Boyarin & J. Boyarin 1993, 1997; cf. Bunzl 2000 and Cohn & Silberstein 1994). Both scholars explicitly position themselves as observant Jews with ambivalent positions towards both Orthodox Judaism and Israeli and Zionist ethico-politics. Based on this work Jonathan Boyarin has proposed that ‘Jewish ethnography’ would be ‘a fragmentary ethnography’, reflecting the ‘partial and tentative nature of ethnographic learning’ and ‘resisting the impulse to portray ‘whole’ cultures’ (J. Boyarin 1996b: 25). This, he claims, is an approach that can be deduced from histories of Jewish difference as well as Judaism’s textual tradition:

Estrangement from the self, or at any rate a double consciousness, is constitutive of Jewishness not because we persist only through being repeatedly rejected by others but because there was a time before the Jew was a Jew. Abraham becomes the first Jew when he leaves his father’s ways and his father’s house to follow an invisible God. Coming to be Jewish is coming to be Other. What is relevant here regarding the possibility of a distinctively Jewish ethnography is that Judaism contains the Other in its own genealogy, that is to say, its own imaginary. (J. Boyarin 1992: 66)

Boyarin clarifies that this proposal is not intended as a universalisation of the figure of ‘the Jew’, nor as a call that only Jewish ethnographers could take on in their scholarship, but rather as closer to the project of feminist and post-colonial theory in their attempts to enact a ‘critical recuperation of repressed cultural traditions’ (ibid.: 71), and as an intervention in light of what Domínguez described as ‘the always unstable position of Jews in post-Enlightenment society – at times minoritized, at times subsumed into the category of the dominant population, at times considered different but not Different, and at other times said to exemplify Difference’ (Domínguez 1993: 622).

In this sense, the notion of ‘Jewish ethnography’ relates to the critique of the dominant historiography of Zionist Israeli politics proposed both by scholars and by the activists with whom I conducted research. These critiques challenge Israeli narratives’ negation of diaspora or exilic Jewish history in the Zionist reformulation of the Jew as sabra (Almog 2000), and the idea that the establishment of the state of Israel brought redemption to the Jewish people, as a unified national body, thereby
erasing difference among Jews (Raz-Krakotzkin 2005). Boyarin’s suggestion is to rescue diaspora from Zionist ideology as a possible cultural and political ‘resource’, rather than that which must be extinguished, and to clearly separate Jewishness from Israeliness or Zionism, as much as the three concepts may now be implicated in one another. Where Mizrahi scholars Ella Shohat and Yehouda Shenhav have pointed to the ways in which Zionism has silenced the voices, histories, and experiences of Mizrahi and Sephardi Jews in favour of a model which elevates one particular version of Ashkenazi Jewish culture and history to equate to Israeli culture and history in general (Shohat 1988, 1999; Shenhav 2006), Boyarin also points to how this politics has been based upon a rejection of Yiddishkayt – of Jewish life in the European diaspora. This interpretation links the transformation of Jewishness, and the negation of its constitutive Otherness, to the parallel Zionist denial of Palestinian life in Israel, which, Boyarin argues, ‘was profoundly though by no means uniquely traceable to an internal lack consequent on the rejection of the Zionist pioneers’ alte zakhen [Yiddish for ‘old things’]’ (J. Boyarin 1996b: 9).

The connection Boyarin draws between Jewish otherness and other Others within the context of Israel/Palestine – in his case, mainly referring to the Palestinians – is important in the way it highlights that the attention to difference or alterity is not only about challenging an idea of whole and unified ‘cultures’, but also about attending to the ways in which certain subjects are formed in oppositional relation to those who have been ethnically, politically, or culturally ‘othered’ within histories of nation-building and colonialism. This, indeed, is what differentiates Boyarin’s model of ‘Jewish ethnography’ – that can be extended beyond his particular focus on Jews and Israel/Palestine – from Virginia Dominguez’ study of conceptions of self and other amongst Jewish Israelis. Whilst her perceptive study People as Subject, People as Object (Dominguez 1989) rightly identifies a Jewish Israeli preoccupation with constantly assessing and re-assessing the boundaries of self and other – what she describes as self-representation and self-objectification through the repeated opposition of that self to various others – she focuses primarily on internal differentiations between different Jewish edot (roughly, ethnic groups, but a term she scrutinises for its ideological charge).1 In this regard Dominguez reflects the blindness of her interlocutors (mainly highly educated, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv-based, Ashkenazi Israelis) to the Palestinian question and their presence in Israel. Considering how the objectification of Ethiopian or Mizrahi Jews as internal Others shows how Israeli discourse relies upon certain containment strategies towards difference in order to buttress the anxiety around the oneness of the
‘Jewish people’ and the state of Israel’s capacity and legitimacy in representing it, Dominguez also takes for granted the introspective nature of such ideas of Jewishness and Israeliness. In doing so she undermines both the vast range of Jewish histories that have not been constituted in this relation to the Israeli state and the Palestinian challenge to the naturalness of the Zionist project in Israel.

It is revealing, however, that Dominguez’ most acute observations of Jewish Israeli unease with external others – also, here, meaning Palestinians – come with her reflections on her position as non-Jewish ethnographer, and particularly one who ‘falls in love with’ Jewish Israel, and for whom the deep identification she feels with her interlocutors is sometimes jarringly interrupted by reminders of her ‘outsider’ status. Where Dominguez’ experiences as ethnographer overlap with my own, though, both as non-Jews studying Israel, is also where the differentiations between Dominguez’ interlocutors and the Israeli left-wing activists with whom I worked become apparent. Where her friends and colleagues’ responses to her non-Jewishness index a rather stable sense of Jewish self that is interrupted by her inquiries, it is rather the already questioned and fragmented idea of selfhood that I encountered in activists’ questioning of my identity. In one instance, for example, Dominguez discusses sharing the draft of a text she has written with a couple of academic Israeli friends, only to be shocked by the response that her writing could be interpreted as anti-semitic. In discussing a piece she had written that referred to the categorisations of kinds of people used in the Israeli census, and pointing to the ways in which it indexes the problematic status of Jewishness, as opposed to the other possible identity categories in Israel, she writes:

My otherness was indexed in his objection. It was not just that I linked otherness to selfhood in a way foreign, even offensive, to Arye. It is also that I did so. Suddenly my non-Jewishness became relevant. […] In appropriating their constitution of their other, I was “otherizing” their other – “liberating” the other from its author(s). It wasn’t quite clear what I was, thereby, doing to the self. (Dominguez 1989: 157-158)

Differently, she reflects on her time in Israel during the war with Lebanon in the summer of 1982, and her intense emotional reaction to and experience of being caught up in the ‘frenzy’ of the ‘home front’ (Dominguez 2013). It is in her self-reflective identification of her feeling, without having known or articulated it at the time, and just before the Sabra and Shatilla massacres invited widespread protest at the Israeli army’s involvement in that atrocity, that Israel’s acts in that war were
unacceptable, even ‘criminal’ (ibid.), that one can sense the cracks in the way she describes her affection for the place:

Something about Israel – its landscape, its struggles with peoplehood, its ongoing shtick – draw me more deeply, as a person with multiple friendships, a life full of sadnesses, loves, and political reactions, and an analyst of human collectivities and noticed and unnoticed social processes. (Dominguez 2012: 20)

In these examples, both the affront of the critique of a non-Jewish ethnographer, as well as her reflections on the seductive pull of a place ‘full of sadnesses’ whose processes of exclusion and othering go largely unnoticed, from within, underline the ways in which Dominguez confronted and was attracted by the troubled but ultimately unified sense of peoplehood that is the object of her analysis.

Thus whilst the awkward relationship of a non-Jewish ethnographer with her Jewish Israeli interlocutors is one which we clearly share in certain respects, my research with those whose self-positioning differed from that of the liberal elite with whom Dominguez worked revealed a different relation to non-Jews that relates, I suggest, also to a different ethical subjectivity and sense of self. The unease with which the question of our insider or outsider status was raised during my fieldwork was, as I described above, not only my own, but also that of the left-wing activists with whom I was in dialogue. Their challenges, in their lives and activist practices, to Zionism and the dominant narratives of Israeli and Jewish life of the state of which they are citizens already go beyond the depictions of a tension between oneness and fragmentation that is the subject of Dominguez’ book. The question of Jewish otherness in and as a relation to the ‘Palestinian question’, to colonialism, and to histories of racism, is not only raised by myself and others such as Jonathan Boyarin, but rather is raised by left-wing activists themselves as their practices actively inscribe the interface of these questions. Thus, I suggest, the question from them came as an apology – an apology for their enduring attachments to a particular subjectivity they felt had been tainted by its complicity with violence. Moreover, and as I will describe here, activists’ ironic relations to Boyarin’s Yiddishkayt also place in question the viability of an identification with exile or diaspora as an alternative cultural and political model to contemporary Israel’s Zionism.
Irony in Yiddish

On the 9th May 2011, the eve of the state’s independence day, a bar in Jaffa staged a party, and the Facebook invitation to it was worded as follows:

Independence Party of Medinat Weimar
Medinat Weimar, the movement for a Jewish state in Thuringia, Germany, is pleased to invite you to a party to celebrate the return to exile, of the body and soul. On this day all of us are diaspora Jews!!! A party with radical Jewish music – Klezmer, Punk, Cabaret and more…

This invitation was bizarre on numerous levels. Medinat Weimar – ‘The State of Weimar’ – was of course a fictional political movement, whose ambition of establishing a Jewish state in Germany and celebrating a ‘return to exile’ mocked nationalist rhetoric and the very notion of a Jewish state, and called for the affirmation of a Jewish identity not subsumed in Zionist narratives of the redemption of the Jewish people through the establishment of the State of Israel. Add to this, though, the location and organisers of the party – a bar in Jaffa run by a Palestinian Israeli activist, which was at the time becoming increasingly popular with Tel Avivi left-wing Jewish activists – and the move to undercut any ethnic or nationalist politics that could be read into the Medinat Weimar project became clearer, yet stranger, still. Why are Jewish and Palestinian Israeli left-wing activists listening to Klezmer music in Jaffa on Israeli independence day? What kind of ‘exile’ was here being evoked, satirised, affirmed, or invented?

The inspiration for the ‘Medinat Weimar’ party was the project of the same name by Israeli artist Ronen Eidelman. His work promotes and simulates the idea of establishing a Jewish state in Eastern Germany in a manner intended to provoke humorous and somewhat surreal questions about Jewish identity, Zionist Israeli nationalism, discourses of anti- and philo-semitism, guilt and remembrance in Germany, as well as the country’s ongoing reluctance to criticise the State of Israel. The ‘movement’s thirteen principles’ include the following:

– Medinat Weimar is a solution to overcome the present crises and heal Jewish trauma, German guilt, East Mediterranean conflicts, East German troubles and many other problems in the world;
– Medinat Weimar defines Jewish not through blood or ancestry but through similarity in mind, culture, common history and unity of fate. Jews from European origin, Jews from non-European origin, Palestinians
Arabs (Muslim and Christian alike) and all other parties affected by the activities of the state of Israel are considered to share a common fate;
– Medinat Weimar believes peoples maintain not only the rights of self-determination and self-definition, but self-redefinition and self-redefinition as well.  

Only in the final principle does Eidelman make it most clear that this ‘movement’ is an absurdist provocation, rather than a serious project to establish a new Jewish state, as it has been received (and opposed) by some commentators. The thirteenth principle reads: ‘Medinat Weimar is not a realistic movement, but rather one that seeks to agitate and provoke by taking anti-Semitic, neo-liberal, nationalistic, Zionist arguments to their unreasonable conclusions illustrating their inner logic and absurdity’.

In choosing to frame their independence day party in the spirit of this provocative art project, activists rejected the mainstream independence day celebrations, with their nationalist imagery and sentiment, and danced and drank instead to an ironic and satirical aesthetic. The idea of the celebration of the culture of exile or diaspora (the gola or galut in Hebrew) – Klezmer music, the Yiddish language, and other elements of European Jewish history, was serious, on the one hand, with a genuine critique of the Zionist erasure of different Jewish histories in the nation-building project of the new Israeli state. The recent trend amongst leftists towards learning and promoting non-Israeli European Jewish language and culture could be considered the Ashkenazi version of the politics of Mizrahi activists who felt their heritage destroyed by Zionism and the establishment of the State of Israel. Those studying Yiddish or appreciating the music of bands such as Oy Division, an Israeli Klezmer revival band who often played at leftist events or at alternative venues such as Levontin 7, often did so out of a critique of and opposition to the Israeli state and its appropriation, and partial elimination, of a particular Jewish culture and ethics. Judaism and Jewish-ness must not, for these activists, necessarily be identified with Israeli nationalism and state violence.

On the other hand, however, there was an irony and humour at play in the recreation of this aesthetic, as leftists enjoyed its absurdist and fantastic quality, and were aware of the sense in which what was being recreated was not exactly what existed before but a projection of the past in relation to an unsatisfactory present. This celebration of exile involved not only the celebration of a fictional past, but the appropriation of an idea – the gola or galut – which has been intensively promoted in state-sanctioned educational and cultural arenas as the Jewish history of
suffering and weakness which is held in contrast to a new, strong and secure Israeli, Hebrew, Zionist identity (Almog 2000; Penslar 2005; Zerubavel 1997). In taking this idea which is so tightly connected to official state discourses and promoting it as their own, Israeli leftists are simultaneously pulling the rug from under their own feet even as they also engage in a serious critique of the claims of Zionism and the Israeli state to represent Jews and Jewish culture. As Eidelman’s final principle declares, there is a self-mockery in the idea of attaching oneself to any new identity or culture in order to displace another, and a recognition that the other that is being embraced is only so in relation to that escape from the self. This sense of irony was evident at many parties or concerts that took place during my fieldwork – the ‘colonial party’ for Purim in which guests were invited to dress up as their favourite historical character from the British Mandate period, or the Klezmer concert where the bizarre mix of Russian-speaking olim (Jewish immigrants to the state) and young radical leftists that made up the audience displayed the difference in the two groups’ appreciation of the music – the former understanding and enjoying the Yiddish and Russian lyrics, and the latter smiling at the references to Palestine and political critiques of the Israeli state regime.

This irony partly resembles what Alexei Yurchak has described of Soviet public life and in particular the spaces of svoi and vnye sociality – a kind of relation to the state whereby one is neither in active opposition to, dissent against, the state, but nor is one co-opted by its authoritative discourses. Yurchak bases his analysis on what he calls the ‘principle of performative shift’ – the way in which the dominant and authoritative discourses of the Soviet regime were reproduced in form (the signifiers) whilst the content (the signified) could change (Yurchak 2005: 114). Thus the kind of subversion of the state Yurchak analyses was not the idealised ‘dissident’ position, of overt opposition to the state, but rather the everyday ways in which even those people working at its heart could ‘displace’ its power. Yurchak comments, ‘between its fixed authoritative forms, this system was “injected” with elements of the new, unpredictable, imaginative, creative, “normal life” that was not limited to the constative meanings of authoritative discourse, even if enabled by its performative reproduction’ (ibid.: 115-116).

The kind of activist practices I have described are clearly far more in the position of dissidence and opposition than those cultural forms about which Yurchak writes (and indeed he writes about his informants’ explicit rejection of the idealised dissident position, the kind of imagination of themselves towards which my informants in many ways aspired). However, in the way in which the Medinat Weimar project, and others in this vein, appropriate and use the same concept of the exile/diaspora Jew
as that promoted by the state, and in a way which parodies or mocks through an identification with the very concept being mocked, resembles the way in which Soviet anekdoty worked to ‘engage, release, expose, and enable a complex set of discontinuities at personal, discursive, social, temporal, and other levels’ (ibid.: 281). Here Yurchak refers to Peter Sloterdijk’s concept of ‘humour that has ceased to struggle’, to explain the humour of Soviet anekdoty, which identify with, yet gently mock, dominant norms, sometimes in ways which made it impossible to tell whether the object or person was being ridiculed or not. Even whilst Israeli radical activists’ humour and irony is far more in the classic protest mode, and often does have the provocative effect that activists intend, its protest is also tempered by the recognition of, reflection on, and sometimes soft parodying of, their own position of belonging to a dominant political regime. This kind of irony recalls Jonathan Lear’s concept of ‘radical hope’, as he argues ‘the possibility of constituting oneself as a certain sort of subject suddenly becomes problematic. One symptom of this is that at such a historical moment a peculiar form of irony will first become possible’ (Lear 2006: 44; italics in the original). From this crisis of subjectivity can emerge creative practices of self-imagining that re-frame the subject’s ability to relate to history. In relation to Israeli activists’ irony these are moments of subversion which disrupt the hegemony of this regime through the assertion of an exilic kind of ethics – a subjectivity which at once is part of, longs for, identifies with a place, a culture, or a collective, and also rejects and distances them.

The ironic nostalgia of my interlocutors, and their projects of celebrating non-Zionist and de-territorialised Jewish identities and languages are ever more poignant and compelling as Israeli Jewish nationalism seems to grow increasingly exclusionary and racialised. These practices constitute a nostalgic ‘aspirational normalcy’ (Berlant 2007: 281) – the idea of being attached to a nostalgic vision that actually keeps one from flourishing – but with the kind of irony that Yurchak identifies in the Soviet context. Activists don’t quite attach themselves to such imaginaries, and yet they also do. As Anne Allison writes in relation to her use of Berlant’s term in the context of Japan and the emergence of a precarious stratum of the underemployed, what she calls ‘my-homeism’ – the celebration of a certain domestic intimacy that in fact no longer remains as it is imagined to once have existed – becomes more appealing as a fantasy as its possibility in reality fades (Allison 2012: 100). However, what is also clear in my ethnography, in the irony of activist practices, is that this celebration of the past as exile is a critical and self-reflective one. This humour is subversive because it uses the language of the state and of Zionism to ridicule and displace them, whilst also
acknowledging certain attachments to and desires for an identification with those narratives. In its ironic and humorous re-interpretations of an exilic past, this ethico-politics manifests itself as the celebration of a past that has already long been appropriated and deployed by the Israeli state in its shaping of a dissatisfactory present. In this sense, activists’ ‘aspirational normalcy of the past’ incorporates both an aspiration for a more ‘normal’, less violent, past – a more innocent past, perhaps, an ideal of not being implicated as a perpetrator of violence – and the critical awareness that this version of the past and of exile is manifested only as a subversive orientation towards the present. In this case, certain Jewish Israeli subjects are placing in question the model proposed by Boyarin of a progressive Jewish reclamation of diaspora, such that his proposition for a ‘Jewish ethnography’ might also be further interrogated. In what follows I do so by exploring its connections to some other ‘Jewish theory’ that also confronts the questions raised here about Jewishness, identity, and fragmentations of diasporic models of being.

Identity in Question

Judith Butler has reflected on the influence of her Jewish upbringing on both her politics vis-à-vis Israel/Palestine, and her theoretical inquiries into a non-violent ethics, partly in response to the increasingly polarised debates over charges of anti-semitism brought towards critics of Israeli policy in public culture in the United States as well as in Europe and Israel. Butler has insisted upon a separation of Jewish and Zionist-Israeli ethics and indeed has pointed to the internal dissidence within Israel that makes critique of Israeli state policy quite clearly distinct from a generalised dislike of Israelis as a ‘people’ (Butler 2006). In Parting Ways Butler echoes Boyarin in his call for the consideration of exile and diaspora as models from Jewish experience that can be employed as part of a progressive politics to take us beyond state violence and in particular its form in contemporary Israel (Butler 2012). Exploring the thought of prominent Jewish philosophers – primarily Emmanuel Levinas, Walter Benjamin, and Hannah Arendt – and framed as in conversation with that of Edward Said and Mahmoud Darwish, Butler draws upon ‘Jewish’ philosophical resources to propose an ethico-politics of ‘cohabitation’. She argues that the relation to otherness that is at the heart of Jewish history and ethics can be interpreted in Levinasian ways as forcing us to think beyond a lens of tolerance, and the idea of choosing to live with others, and towards a recognition of the unchosen-ness of the human condition and the ways in which others may impinge upon the subject’s
relation to herself. It can only be genocidal, Butler claims, to imagine one can reject an ‘ontology of plurality’ and choose with whom one can share the world, as she gleans from Arendt’s commentary on the Eichmann trial (ibid.: 100).

Butler’s engagement with Said and Darwish, though, at the heart of her reading of ‘Jewish philosophy’, differs from that of Boyarin – whose recognition of the Palestinian place in Jewish and Israeli life does not go as far in unsettling the very foundations of political identity as we might gauge from Butler’s work. In her reading of Said’s *Freud and the Non-European*, in which she refers to Levinas’ ethics and his interpretation of the subject as radically interrupted, even persecuted, by the other, we see echoes of what I have described of Israeli left-wing activists’ practices of the displacement of attachments to selfhood. Where activists’ ironic reformulations of exile and diaspora place in question their belongings and attachments in Zionist Israel, I suggest, Butler and Levinas provide a parallel interpretation of Jewish ethics that similarly disrupts stable oppositions of self and other. Butler contrasts this feature of Levinas’ writings with Martin Buber’s promotion of an ‘I-Thou’ relation and its association with his binationalism in the early days of Zionism and the state of Israel. ‘The Levinasian position,’ Butler claims, ‘assumes the asymmetry of the relation between the subject and the Other; it also assumes that this other is already me, not assimilated as a “part” of me, but inassimilable as that which interrupts my own continuity and makes impossible an “autonomous” self at some distance from an “autonomous” other’ (ibid.: 38). Butler ends and interprets this section of her discussion with a citation from Darwish’s *Memory for Forgetfulness*, in which in a conversation with a Jewish lover the question of loving Arabs or loving Jews is raised as an absurd and impossible one. The question of the love for these particular others, Butler suggests, raises the paradox of ‘an impossible and necessary union’ of binationalism – ‘not love, but […] a necessary and impossible attachment that makes a mockery of identity, an ambivalence that emerges from the centering of the nationalist ethos and that forms the basis of a permanent ethical demand’ (ibid.: 53). It is the ‘permanent ethical demand’ of the relation to otherness at the heart of subjectivity, and specifically in the relation of Jewish Israeli to Palestinian, of ethno-national self to its other, that can be read also into my activist interlocutors’ re-positioning of the notions of exile, identity, and nationalistic identifications.

Where Boyarin outlines a diasporic ethics that insists on asserting the particularism of identity, then, Butler pushes for one that highlights the unchosen-ness of that very same identity. There is thus an important difference between the use of the idea of diaspora of the two scholars,
even as both claim to unsettle and challenge liberal multiculturalism and its realisation in the nation-state form. In this case, Butler’s making a ‘mockery of identity’ seems closer to my ethnographic case of Israelis who uncomfortably, and often humorously, refer to their own Jewishness and raise the question of their relations to non-Jews within this frame. In this sense activists’ reformulations of diaspora Jewishness mirror Butler’s reading of Levinas as destabilising any interpretation of his thought, as only, or straightforwardly, ‘Jewish’. When activists ironically mock their own attachments to the nature of Jewish identity in relation to contemporary Israeli politics they are placing in question the political effects of certain attempts to make of ‘the Jew’ a particular ethical figure. If it is the consequence of activists’ and Levinas’ Jewishness that the very basis of the identity of ‘the Jew’ is in question, what kind of sense does it make to refer to Levinasian ethics as ‘Jewish theory’? And indeed, does recognising the interruption of otherness at the heart of ethical subjectivity not destabilise any particularist idea that certain (Jewish) subjects represent, or are, the Other, always an index of the self-sameness of those from whom they are different? A closer engagement with Levinas’ thought itself here will help in considering these questions.

In a 1969 essay entitled Judaism and Revolution, Levinas addressed the political events of the previous year in Paris in a typically cryptic manner (Levinas 1994). It was amongst the Talmudic readings that he regularly gave, which have often been considered separately from his ‘philosophical’ work. The Mishna and Gemara (the compilation of texts that together constitute the Talmud) discussed raise the question of an employer’s obligation toward his workers and evokes, among other principles, the obligation of hospitality and the idea of the minhag ha medina – obligation to respect the custom or law of the city in which one finds oneself. Levinas excuses himself from the beginning of his lecture with the caveat that his knowledge of the Talmud may be inferior to the Jewish religious scholars he is addressing, thus marking his distance from the ‘theologians’, and proceeds to challenge what he calls the ‘sublime materialism’ (ibid.: 97) of Marxist political discourses. He emphasises not the concept of ‘man’ and his alienation through political economy, but rather ‘Jewish humanism’ – ‘the man whose rights must be defended is in the first place the other man; it is not initially myself. It is not the concept “man” which is at the basis of this humanism; it is the other man’ (ibid.: 98). In other words, Levinas uses here the Jewish text, a ‘union text before the letter’ as he refers to it (ibid.: 98), to make a broader ethico-political point – to challenge the socialist ideas by which he was surrounded, questioning what alienation might entail otherwise than through the concept of the proletariat, and the idea of the rights of man through a
consideration of the obligation, or responsibility, towards other men. He makes much effort to underline that the ‘descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob’ of the Mishna do not refer only to those recognised as Jews but as signifying a ‘self-conscious humanity’ (ibid.: 98), suggesting that ‘the heirs of Abraham are of all nations: any man truly man is no doubt of the line of Abraham’ (ibid.: 99).

Another important facet of this text, however, is its commentary on Israel and Zionism. Levinas was clearly also motivated here by the anti-Zionism of some of those participants of the 1968 protests, a move he found unconscionable given his feeling that Israel represented vulnerability itself – the vulnerability to persecution upon which he based his ethics of responsibility. Levinas’ Zionism famously led him to support Israel throughout and despite its actions towards the Palestinians. In response to this some have considered him an awkward philosopher through which to think ethics, whilst others have found ways of following his philosophy whilst rejecting his politics on Israel/Palestine (Butler 2012; Caro 2009). In Judaism and Revolution the tension is clear. Levinas writes that ‘we are responsible beyond our commitments’ (Levinas 1994: 108) – which I read as meaning responsibility for others extended for Levinas beyond our particularisms, be they ethnic, religious, or national (concepts that, notably, Levinas never definitively separates out from one another, signalling the ambiguity of what precisely he was referring to when writing explicitly about Judaism). His attachment to Israel relates to his perception of its necessity for the existence of a Judaism whose significance extends far beyond what it might mean for Jews:

Doesn’t Jewish persecution aim at something else in Judaism, an intangible something? Someone here has said – I liked the expression very much – Judaism or responsibility for the entire universe, and consequently, a universally persecuted Judaism. To bear responsibility for everything and everyone is to be responsible despite oneself. To be responsible despite oneself is to be persecuted. Only the persecuted must answer for everyone, even for his persecutor. Ultimate responsibility can only be the fact of an absolutely persecuted man, having no right to a speech that would disengage him from his responsibility. […] Non-Jews can also feel this Jewish particularism. This adds to the acuteness of the tension between Judaism and universalism and confers upon Judaism a meaning beyond universalism, if one can express it thus. (ibid.: 114-115)

Levinas’ appeal here to interpret Judaism as universal persecution differs somewhat from the work of other scholars who seek to universalise the Jew as a figure of the persecuted and the exilic. In arguing for an understanding of ‘Jewish particularism’ as ‘meaning beyond
universalism’, Levinas recalls his distinction between ‘totality’ and ‘infinity’, where the transcendence of infinity is not opposed to that which is captured in the ‘totality’ of representation and thought – it is not negativity, or non-thought, but simply that which is beyond thinking, or what Levinas refers to as ‘thematization’. This is his critique of Heidegger’s Being and the basis of his other widely recognised motif of ‘the face’, which, as has been made clear by several students of Levinas, does not signify the actual, physical face, but the interruption to sameness and the trace of infinite otherness, or transcendence (Butler 2012; Critchley 1999; Hand 2009). Thus, in another essay on Judaism, Levinas describes his notion of responsibility as that which ‘will never end’ – ‘ein ladavar sof’. ‘In the society of the Torah,’ he writes, ‘this process is repeated to infinity; beyond any responsibility attributed to everyone and for everyone, there is always the additional fact that I am still responsible for that responsibility’ (Levinas 1989: 226). Jewish particularism takes us into the realm of the beyond, or the transcendent, for Levinas, and not into the universalisation of ‘the Jew’. It is employed as an exemplar of his philosophy of ethical subjectivity – of an ethics of responsibility and, ultimately, persecution that is inescapable and infinitely recurring.

Here Levinas’ theory, Jewish but also beyond Jewishness, recalls the ways in which Israeli left-wing activists related their ethics and ironic displacements of exile and diaspora to a specifically Jewish context whilst simultaneously calling into question the kinds of attachments and identities that were thereby being evoked. This challenge to Jewish Israeli ethico-politics reflects that posed by Levinas and Butler to the positioning of any theory as particularly Jewish, given how their interrogations of Jewishness lead us to question any idea of stable ethno-nationalist identities. These readings of ‘Jewish theory’, then, together with Israeli activists’ resistance to practicing a stable Jewishness, in my ethnography, lead me to approach the idea of ‘Jewish ethnography’ with suspicion. As these authors explore, we are already far beyond the realm of the exclusively Jewish. Hence, although Levinasian thought is often considered Jewish or even theological in substance, I wish now to return to the emergence of such categorisations in the final section of this paper, and revisit the unease with which my activist interlocutors both ascribed to and unsettled them in their engagements with the Israeli/Palestinian present.
THE QUESTION OF OTHERS: REFLECTIONS ON ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE ‘JEWISH QUESTION’

The Questionability of Jews (and Others)

Tracing the emergence of the conceptualisation of Jews as a minority in Enlightenment, secularising, western Europe, Aamir Mufti suggests that the Jew becomes a question because of the challenge posed by the combination of both Jewish community and Jews’ perceived cosmopolitanism to the emerging liberal, European nation-state (Mufti 2009). In being asked to identify himself, ‘who are you?’, as Mufti explores particularly through the example of Lessing’s play Nathan the Wise, the Jew comes to signal the impossibility and unfinished nature of the secular nation-state project, an unanswerable question and thus a crisis for the politics of emancipation and rights of late imperial Europe. Mufti suggests,

The ‘question’ that is repeatedly addressed to the figure of the Jew in these early decades of the era of emancipation – ‘Who are you?’ – is, in a rigorous sense, an impossible one to answer, for the impossibility of an adequate response is inherent in its rhetorical form as a question. To respond, for instance, that, ‘yes, we are French’ – or German or English, as the case may be – is to make an utterance whose truth will always be in question. For while the demand may purport to be addressed to the ‘Jews of France’ (or England or Germany), it assumes the existence of Jews in general, and of Jews as a question in general. The attempt in the nineteenth century to assimilate the Jews into any of the European nation-states, no matter how sincere, is thus one almost intended to fail and to remain an open question. (ibid.: 89-90)

The specificity of the Jew as the minority subject of this question – this demand to answer for and to the European, and Christian, nation-state – is emphasised also by Gil Anidjar when he asks instead ‘the Christian question’, or rather, asks why it was never asked in the same way as its Jewish counterpart. Anidjar argues, alongside Talal Asad (1993), that the category of religion as a distinct and separate sphere from, say, political life, and importantly as distinguished from race, paralleled the emergence of the Jew, and indeed the Arab, as well as the connection between them as two kinds of ‘semites’, in the same historical period that Mufti studies. It was, and is, the fantasy of ‘Western Christendom’, or Europe, Anidjar suggests, that both created the categories of race, ethnicity, religion, and politics, whilst also externalising the Jew, the Arab, and others, from its majority and Orientalist limits. The tendency to separate analyses of antisemitism, on the one hand, and Orientalism, on the other, ignores the ways in which both the idea of enmity between different subjects, and the
contemporary relation of Europe to the question of Jews and/or Arabs, ‘have been co-constituted by, and most importantly, with and within, Europe’ (Anidjar 2008: 36. Cf. Anidjar 2003).

The ‘Christian question’ cannot similarly be asked, Anidjar argues, because this would destabilise the very foundations of Europe as an idea that separates itself from the histories of racism that yet belong to its very invention of the concept of race. 6 Anidjar places political Zionism within the same analytical framework:

No less Orientalistic than its elders in its conceptions of the East, no less anti-Semitic than the rest of the Christian West, Zionism more pointedly reinscribes what was already at work in the early invention of the Semites: the European wedge that, now called “secularization,” would turn away from religion, distance itself from the only invention of its Semitic, monotheistic, and desertic origins (“Les Juifs dehors!” – Herzl heard in Paris and, upholding the imperative, called on Jews everywhere to abide), and separate race from religion, and religion from (modern) politics, separate, finally, the Jew from the Arab. Political Zionism, then, is another name for the beginning and end of the “Semite,” its paradoxically double internalization and exteriorization. The enemy within, the enemy without: the Arab, out of the Jew, and the Jew, out of Europe, exported, deported. (Anidjar 2008: 33)

The history of the ‘Jewish question’ is thus framed by Mufti and Anidjar as the history of European imperialism and secularisation, and their concomitant processes of differentiation and exclusion. Does it then make sense to make ‘Jewish theory’, or indeed, ‘Jewish ethnography’ out of this history, this exclusion, this question? Does the putting into question of the Jewish question not invite us similarly to destabilise the bounds of theory and ethnography that would export and deport their Jewish versions – Jewish theory, Jewish ethnography – from the philosophical and anthropological canon?

Such is my sense when I recall the apology in the question – a placing in question of the question – when my interlocutors and I interrogated each other and ourselves on the question of (my) Jewishness. It would not be enough only to examine the crisis of representation in ethnographic research and writing, or to consider the complexities of the power dynamics between ethnographer and her subjects, as a reflection on this moment, as we have long since learnt must also be done in the practice of ethnography (Clifford 1983; Clifford & Marcus 1986; Marcus & Fischer 1986; Crapanzano 1980; Rabinow 1977). Rather I would point to what Johannes Fabian has noted as the problem of ‘presence’: the fact that, despite the endless traces of absence – in the case he discusses the absence
of the memory of anti-semitism in Germany – we work with the illusion that we are present to ourselves, that the self is present, whilst the Other has to be made present, to be re-presented so as to be comprehensible to the self (Fabian 2007). Such insistence on representation could be considered an extension of the way in which, as Gil Hochberg notes, the amnesia of nationalist historiography prevents us from seeing how self and other, like Arab and Jew, are ‘necessarily configured through or in relation to the other’ (Hochberg 2010: 2). It is this amnesia, these traces of absence, I suggest, that provoked the unease or the awkwardness of the question of Jewishness that I relate through my fieldwork encounters.

Thus, whilst Fabian suggests addressing this problem by aiming for greater presence, for anthropology to become a ‘human science of presence’ (Fabian 2007: 117), as he confronts the ongoing othering of the Others in the distinction between studying ‘our’ societies and the other ones, I hesitate to follow him in this quest for presence. In the quotation from Derrida’s Of Hospitality with which I opened this paper, it is precisely the presence of Being, in the terms of phenomenology, that Derrida questions. Following Levinas in his reworking of the trace as an absence, an inscription left by the trauma of the Other, Derrida makes of Levinasian infinity the aporia of language that characterises his work on writing and difference. The relation of the Same and the Other, Derrida argues in one of his most sensitive interpretations of Levinas, At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am (Derrida 2007), is one of untangling, or undoing, of negotiating ‘the compromise that will leave the nonnegotiable intact, and manage it so that the fault, the one that consists in inscribing the wholly other in the empire of the same, alters the same enough to absolve it from and of itself’ (ibid.: 150). It is the acknowledgment of absence, of alterity and non-self within the subject, that I take from Derrida, following Levinas, to be an open question to which a response is necessary, indeed inevitable, but one which cannot simply be closed. The ever necessary asking of the ‘Jewish question’, which nonetheless has been posed through processes of differentiation and exclusion, resonates here as a question that delineates absence and alterity as its very premise.

**Conclusion**

In examining what is at stake in a call for ‘Jewish ethnography’, and its echoes in what we might consider various formulations of ‘Jewish theory’, I have argued that what might be particularly Jewish is a cautious questioning of the very drive to categorise and elevate an ethno-national identity as either representation or methodology. In the work of Levinas,
Butler and Derrida critical engagements with Jewishness recall the uneasy attachments and subjectivities of those Jewish Israeli activists with whom certain awkward interactions raised the question-as-apology as an analytical focus. Theoretical renderings of subjectivity as always interrupted by otherness provide a lens through which to consider the ironic reformulations of diaspora and exile in activists’ cultural practices not as a reclamation of a particularistic identity but rather as critique of, and creative resistance to, the ethico-political imperatives to do so in contemporary Israel/Palestine. Following their lead, I question the attempt to address the relative lack of a sustained attention to Jews and Jewishness in anthropology through a methodology of ‘Jewish ethnography’ by pointing instead to the very constitution of the ‘Jewish question’ through lack, absence, and exclusion. In this way a broader question about anthropology’s conceptualisations of identity and subjectivity can be raised, that does not make of fragmentation and trauma only a Jewish experience but neither writes Jewish experience out of the history of European theory and ethnography.

Engaging the notions of fragments, failure, void, and silence, Israeli film-maker and writer Udi Aloni discusses the work of Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman in the provocatively entitled *What Does a Jew Want?*, as he describes Suleiman’s chronicling of ‘Israeli Arab’ life in Israel/Palestine. The double negation of the label of ‘Israeli Arab’ – neither Jew nor Palestinian – is rendered by Suleiman, in Aloni’s words, through an ‘aesthetic of the present-absent subject’ (Aloni 2013: 78). The Arab who is not Palestinian, and the Israeli who is not a Jew, Aloni suggests, places the question of absence amongst the appearance of presence, such that Aloni cannot call himself ‘Israeli’ or a ‘Palestinian Jew’. Neither can Suleiman be called a ‘Jewish Palestinian’, as Aloni considers strategies of naming that might deal with the trauma of absence (ibid.: 82). There is no resolution of the question Aloni poses of ‘What Does a Jew Want?’, just as Anidjar did not seek to resolve that of ‘What does the Christian Want?’, when he asked it, but rather to underline what it is about the question that unsettles theories of sameness and difference. Similarly, I hesitate to try to resolve the question with which I was faced during fieldwork and which caused my discomfort, alongside that of those who asked it, with either ‘Jewish ethnography’ or ‘Jewish theory’. The absence of a similar notion of ‘Christian ethnography’ and ‘Christian theory’ is enough, I think, to trouble us as we attempt either to particularise the trace of absence or to universalise the experience of particularity, and thus to ask the ‘Jewish question’ to answer for our troubles with otherness.

References
THE QUESTION OF OTHERS: REFLECTIONS ON ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE ‘JEWISH QUESTION’


Notes

*1 Edot is the plural form of eda – roughly translated, ethnic group – which, however, is used far more commonly to refer to Mizrahi than Ashkenazi Jews, highlighting its Orientalist and colonialist overtones as the edot of the East are contrasted to the internally differentiated and European groupings of different Ashkenazi Jews – e.g. Polish, German, Hungarian, etc. (cf. Penslar 2005).


*3 Ibid.
Rachel Leah-Jones’ documentary film Ashkenaz (Leah-Jones 2007) gives a nuanced and entertaining account of this counter-cultural identity politics and issues of race and ethnicity in contemporary Israel.

Differently, Jonathan Boyarin also addresses the historical emergence of Jewish-Christian(-Muslim) relations and identities in Europe with reference to Spanish colonial conquests in Latin America (Boyarin 2009).

In anthropology, certain scholars have considered, following the growing study of Christianity as ethnographic object, the relationship between Christian theology and anthropology’s history as a discipline as well as its theoretical premises – see Cannell (2006) and Robbins (2006). This work is instructively critical of anthropology’s Christianity and indeed has suggested that Christianity is ‘the repressed’ of the discipline (Cannell 2006: 4) but as Robbins notes is in its infancy and has not gone as far as Anidjar and others I cite in probing the relationship between Christianity, Europe, and colonialism.