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Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry, 5(1), pp 90–97 January 2018.
© Cambridge University Press, 2017 doi:10.1017/pli.2017.46

Figuring and Transfiguring: a response to Bryan Cheyette

John McLeod

This response to Bryan Cheyette's essay "Against Supersessionist Thinking: Old and New, Jews and Postcolonialism, the Ghetto and Diaspora" favorably considers its critique of the problems of foundational and supersessionist thinking in postcolonial enquiry. It supports Cheyette's claim that postcolonial critique needs better to accommodate the particulars of the Jewish diaspora into its field of vision. It notes how the tendency in some postcolonial critique to approach ideas of nations and diasporas as discrete counterpointed paradigms does not readily capture their complexity and entanglements, and may also contribute unwittingly to the elision of the Jewish diasporic contexts that are not easily mapped within this disciplinary dispensation. Instead, this response advocates a transpositional and productively mobile approach to thinking transfiguratively across and beyond received paradigms to help shape a postcolonial critical sensibility within which matters of Jewish diasporicity might resound more progressively.

Keywords: Jewish, diaspora, supersessionist, postcolonial, Cheyette

As a young girl growing up in Attleboro, Massachusetts, the mixed-race transracial adoptee Catherine E. McKinley kept close to her person a photograph of an unidentified African American woman that she had taken during a Black Liberation Day festival in the nearby town of Providence. When she went to boarding school soon after the festival, she placed the framed photo on her dresser and tidied away the photographs of her white adoptive family in a drawer. Calling the woman "Mattie," she pretended that the stranger was her birth-mother as a way of slighting her family in Attleboro, but also, as she admits, as a form of "protection. . . . As I made more and more friendships with other Black students, who were fighting in their own ways the intense alienation of our fancy prep school, I joined them in trading battle cuts as we policed a strong Black line of social identity."[1] Mattie's image, of crucial political and emotional significance to the young McKinley, indulged the widely held assumption of

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1 Catherine E. McKinley, *The Book of Sarahs: A Family in Parts* (New York: Counterpoint, 2002), 30. For an extended reading of the representation of adoption in McKinley's memoir, see John McLeod, *Life Lines: Writing Transcultural Adoption* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 160–78.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.46 Published online by Cambridge University Press

McKinley's racial genealogy: she was, she believed, the biogenetic daughter of a white birth-father and black birth-mother. Yet this assumption is undone once McKinley begins to trace her consanguineous relations. In a letter from the agency that handled her adoption, she learns that her birth-mother "was a twenty-two-year-old white, Jewish woman" and her "Birth Father was an African American man, in his forties and a protestant."[2] The revelation "disturb[s] the foundation of my fantasies," she admits: "I had no room in my imagination for a white birth mother. . . . And the complication of a Jewish family—the fact that there was another dimension of challenge to my identity—felt excruciating."[3] McKinley's memoir of the emotional and identitarian consequences of her tracing, *The Book of Sarahs: A Family in Parts* (2002), charts the deleterious impact of these discoveries on her fragile and evolving sense of adult personhood as she struggles to negotiate across the several, serrated lines of biogenetic and cultural connection that entangle her relations with African, European, Jewish, and Native American peoples. As a young woman, she was looking, she writes, "for a way to find my story within the larger story of African Americans, but I felt worn out from trying to cast myself within the very narrow conventions in narratives of Blackness of that era. I was an African American woman without any discernible roots, with barely any melanin, with a Jewish birth mother, adopted and raised in a WASP nest."[4] No available paradigms of personhood could contain her. Her sense of personhood as split between competing cultural claims, each at a remove from the other, would soon prove dangerous to her psychological well-being.

As in most accounts of transracial and transcultural adoption, McKinley's memoir throws into sharp relief the ways in which for all, adopted or not, the seemingly intimate realms of family-making and personhood are fundamentally designed and damaged by the wider disciplinary lineaments of cultural and racial provenance that often uphold notions of discrete genealogical lines. It reminds us that notions of racial singularity and attachment are always the result of narrative work, so that, in Mark C. Jerng's words, "race [is] an *effect* of negotiating one's dependencies, attachments, and identifications to others,"[5] not their guarantor nor unimpeachable foundation. The suppression of the complexity of McKinley's cultural relations in order to comply with the designs of racial or cultural "identity" mirrors a wider disciplinary regime. McKinley notes that her white mum could not recall being told about her daughter's Jewish ancestry, but wonders if her forgetfulness was strategic and tidy: "Had my mother known? Had she not told me this to protect me in some way—to keep my identity struggle less complicated? Was she afraid that if I knew I was both Black and Jewish, there might be a larger distance between us?"[6] In a context where the "larger story" and predominant "very narrow conventions" of personhood and identification keep separate African American, WASP, and Jewish domains in interests of "identity," no wonder McKinley's adult "struggle" with selfhood eventually led to serious emotional disquiet and self-harm.

2 McKinley, *The Book of Sarahs*, 34.
3 Ibid., 35, 36.
4 Ibid., 61.
5 Mark C. Jerng, *Claiming Others: Transracial Adoption and National Belonging* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 88; emphasis added.
6 McKinley, *The Book of Sarahs*, 46.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.46 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The quarantining of African American and Jewish affairs from each other in the interests of securing legible personhood underscores the setting at a distance of actually intersecting relations at large. Transcultural adoption narratives are of fundamental value not least because they expose the intimization of discipline, power, performative personhood, and the pragmatics of "praxis." Several of the preoccupations of Bryan Cheyette's fine, inspiring, and necessary essay—foundationalism, exceptionalism, supersession, "theory"—resonate readily with the lived particulars of McKinley's personhood, not least the urgent requirement that we relinquish discrete or Manichean models that refuse to recognize the inevitable interconnections that bind beyond received "history." Although transcultural adoptive family-making might seem at a remove from Cheyette's concern with academic disciplinarity—although, as both adoptee and scholar, I negotiate this intersection daily—the damage done by an unthinking adherence to the conventional domains of cultural, racial, historical, and identitarian provenance is discernible in each and discloses their relationality. As such, these parallels remind us that a preoccupation with "theory," as Cheyette understands it from Adorno, has vital consequences "beyond the academy"[7] in the wider world where, to borrow again McKinley's words, "narrow conventions and narratives" propel an actioning of culture that constrains the opportunities for reimagining transpersonal, cultural, and historical contacts across a range of lines of relation—a scenario captured vividly in McKinley's memorable complaint that, as an adoptee, "I sit down in someone else's paradigms and try to figure myself out."[8]

The concomitant paradigms that Cheyette charts and challenges specifically in the academy require theoretical enquiry, not least in order to help fashion a way of thinking of the intersections and entanglements with which, and indeed in which, we might figure cultural relations and realities differently. The spatial and temporal consequences of supersessionist thinking uphold such disciplinary divides. Cheyette is right to note a tendency within the formation of postcolonial studies to appropriate abstractly the vocabularies of Jewish diasporic fortunes such as "diaspora" and "ghetto" without securing an attendant engagement with the historical and cultural particulars of Jewish diasporas. To be sure, postcolonial studies has not usually mapped the relations among empire, postcolonialism, and Jewish fortunes in its rendition of postcolonial concerns. The theoretical turn of the 1980s often dwelt upon South Asian matters, as in Homi K. Bhabha's exploration of the "sly civility"' of nineteenth-century colonized Indians or the fictions of E. M. Forster and Salman Rushdie, or Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's tales of the Rani of Simur and her advocacy of the work of Mahasweta Devi. Edward W. Said's work was famously denuded of its Palestinian provenance in the extrapolation of his notion of "Orientalism" for postcolonial enquiry, but his literary-critical discussion into the productively vexed relations between culture and imperialism usually stayed within the canonical: Rudyard Kipling, Aimé Césaire, Joseph Conrad, W. B. Yeats. In a similar vein, the focus of postcolonial literary studies as it developed toward the end of the century continued to engage closely with the privileged areas of the former Commonwealth, albeit with an additional focus on indigenous or First Nations peoples and the advent

7 This is one of several phrases where I cite from the Cheyette essay included in the present issue.
8 McKinley, *The Book of Sarahs*, 287.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.46 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of resistant postcolonial cultural practices at the metropolitan center by diasporic figures from these particular once-colonized locations—but rarely Jews. The introduction of "tricontinentalism" in 2001 as a means of expanding the geographical reach, cultural range, and the acknowledgment of the historical drivers of postcolonialism firmly anchored the field to the political fortunes of South Asia, Africa, and the Americas.[9] Within these critical conversations, especially those concerning the new modes of thought struck through diasporic sensibilities, the specificity of Jewish fortunes either were not registered or paradoxically elided through the induction of Jews into longer lists of diasporic folk whose perceived common predicament produced at best a gestural attention to detail. This is discernible in Bhabha's albeit well-intentioned explanation in an interview of the "problem of difference" as when "a particular cultural trait or tradition—the smell of somebody's food, the color of their skin, the accent that they speak with, their particular history, *be it Irish or Indian or Jewish*—becomes the site of contestation, abuse, insult, and discrimination."[10]

Cheyette's essay highlights a great deal of valuable comparative work of late by Michael Rothberg, Maxim Silverman, Sarah Casteel, and others that corrects these oversights and brokers relations between Jewish and postcolonial studies or seeks to situate Jews squarely within the parameters of postcolonial inquiry. Yet his necessary proper attention to Jewish fortunes within the field to my mind remains endangered, no doubt unwittingly, by those maneuvers in the field that seek to discredit "theory," including "the postcolonial," in the name of firmly anticolonial praxis unresponsive to the sufferings and perspectives of diasporas. These often pivot upon a preference for the nation and nationalism as the most appropriate resources for contesting, to use Derek Gregory's important term, "the colonial present."[11] For some time now, several postcolonial scholars have sought to map the field as caught in a binary struggle between those who seek to pursue a properly insurgent praxis, indebted to deferential Marxism and liberationary nationalism, and those whose approach to colonial disenfranchisement in terms of culture and discourse has led to the problematic questioning of certain modes of political action (such as nationalism) as well as the exaltation of itinerant innovative aesthetics identified with the dalliances of diasporic literature.[12] As I have argued elsewhere, this setting-at-odds does not always capture the complexity and nuance of a great deal of work across the full range of postcolonialism's critical conversations.[13] At the same time, from a different vantage,

9 The advent of this phrase can be found in Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

10 Gary A. Olson and Lynn Worsham, "Staging the Politics of Difference: Homi Bhabha's Critical Literacy," *Race, Rhetoric and the Postcolonial*, eds. Gary A. Olson and Lynn Worsham (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 3–42, esp. 16; emphasis added.

11 See Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

12 We find these mappings often in the work of Neil Lazarus, whose rendition of postcolonial studies both installs and charts perceived tensions between materialist and culturalist (read diasporic) postcolonialisms, very much from the standpoint of the former. See, for example, Neil Lazarus, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) and Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Alas, not all are as deft and intellectually judicious as Lazarus when critiquing postcolonial studies from a declared materialist position.

13 See John McLeod, "Postcolonial Studies and the Ethics of the Quarrel," *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory*, 40. 1 (2017): 97–113.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.46 Published online by Cambridge University Press

diasporic thought has been productively challenged as adhering too closely to some of the normative and chauvinistic ways of imagining community considered by some to despoil thinking and living nationally. Gayatri Gopinath has warned that "diaspora shores up the gender and sexual ideologies of dominant nationalism,"[14] whereas adoption scholar David L. Eng argues that "diaspora is firmly attached to genealogical notions of racial descent, filiation and biological traceability. Configuring diaspora as displacement from a lost homeland or exile from an exalted origin can thus underwrite regnant ideologies of nationalism."[15] The problems as well as possibilities of both nation and diaspora may be much closer and more entangled than some assume. These entanglements are lost when both are tidied up and counterpointed as discrete paradigms.

Arguably, privileging the frame of the nation as the proper concern of a politicized postcolonialism may not disrupt, where appropriate, the postcolonial framing of Jewish culture and politics *exclusively* in terms of Israel/Palestine and the conquests of Zionism, so little room is opened to think about Jewish particulars in a different context to such necessary and urgent concerns. To be sure, Gregory is quite right to expose important lines of connection between the British Empire and today's appalling conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Israel/Palestine, and so remind us that the ambitions of postcolonial critique remain as urgent and necessary as ever in our "colonial present." Given the political and humanitarian tragedy of the Palestinians that continues relentlessly to unfold, for some an ardent pursuit of Jewish diasporicity in terms of postcolonial subalterneity and dissidence may seem less pressing than protesting the symbolic and systemic violence of the Israeli nation-state as a colonial force. Patrick Williams is not alone these days in seeking to centralize Palestine in an evolving postcolonialism within which it has hitherto been absent: "This absence is remarkably difficult to understand (How can we not be working *on* Palestine?), other than perhaps as one of triumphs of the Israeli propaganda machine in convincing postcolonial scholars that they are not in fact witnessing a brutal, if belated, form of colonialism . . .—the worst example of colonialism in the modern world."[16] The sophistication and critical position of Williams's fine essay are not at issue here; his advocacy of a refurbished postcolonialism, flexible and fit for future purpose, is laudable, as is his insistence that postcolonial research engages rather than ignores the Palestinian situation. But the wider point obtains, too: rightly or wrongly, there often seems little space within postcolonial studies where Jewish diasporicity might appear beyond the dark lenses of Zionism and Israel's deplorable usurpation of Palestinian lands. The lack of attention to Jewish diasporicity risks keeping at odds Jewish and Palestinian relations in a manner that would have thoroughly disappointed Edward Said. To borrow Cheyette's words, little emerges to challenge the "binary, analogical and moralized world" in which nuance is lost, and where the opportunities for

14 Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 10.

15 David L. Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship, Queer Liberalism and the Radicalization of Intimacy* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 13.

16 Patrick Williams, " 'Outlines of a Better World': Rerouting Postcolonialism," *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*, eds. Janet Wilson, Cristina Şandru, and Sarah Lawson Welsh (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 86–97, esp. 91.

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intersectional and multidirectional thinking, not least in opening up vital alliances of intellectual or political rapport, are not taken.

The elision of Jewish particulars in a postcolonial frame appears especially fascinating when one brings together, on the one hand, Cheyette's account of the supersessionist maneuvers of postcolonial writing seeking to distance itself from "a monumental Jewish history of victimhood" with, on the other, Gopinath's and Eng's concerns of diasporicity as inflected by patrician, chauvinistic, and heteronormative modes of genealogical filiation. In the light of Cheyette's exposure of supercessionist rather than transpositional relations between Jewish and postcolonial diasporas indexed by the writing of Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul, and others, we are invited to figure diasporic literature in Oedipal, intergenerational terms—as repressing seminal examples of diasporic travails borne from the Jewish experience while continuing to use its names ("diaspora," "ghetto"). To this end, Cheyette's critique of supersessionism importantly joins those voices in challenging generational models of diaspora that historicize it in terms of antecedent, ancestry, and generational genealogy, not least because the tracing of such lines of connection keeps in place a sense of diasporic histories and peoples as discrete, as well as privileging filial over affiliative relations.

That said, to my mind the memory work of diasporic criticism *and* literature possesses the potential to unseat a range of disciplinary modes of thinking that install endogamous models of history and would not think to ask (as must Catherine McKinley) how received postcolonial, African American, and Jewish domains might have something important to do with, or say to, one another. As Cheyette implies in his reading of Michael Rothberg's work, this is a matter of temporality. I welcome the critical encounter between history's supersessionist generational chronotopias and the disruptive time of diasporic memory that, as in the case of transcultural adoptees, cannot be readily synchronized with recourse to the received timelines of identity and family-making that indulge the foundational temporality of consanguineous generationality. To be sure, Cheyette is rightly suspicious of negating history through a critique of historicism that declares it as compromised and calcified through its adherence to disciplinary constraints. His engagement with history as a supple and protean mode of thinking diverts history from being sidelined as crude foundationalism. On this point, however, I would respectfully part company with Cheyette's suspicion toward the work of Caryl Phillips as a "postmodern traversing 'of ethnicity *and* era' in the name of the power of anachronism." To my mind, Phillips's work indeed shapes a literary "travelling," both ethical and political, that demands an attention to history as an ongoing mutable necessity at the same time as destabilizing a rigid historicism. In *Crossing the River* (1993), Phillips's fictional remembering of the life and loves of Captain Hamilton, a figure based on the one-time slave trader John Newton (1725–1807), challenges the swift moralizing condemnation of Newton as evildoer but also problematizes his insertion within an abolitionist history that lauds his subsequent repentance of the trade and his support of figures such as William Wilberforce.[17] By remembering Newton via the fictional creation of Hamilton, Phillips returns Newton to history precisely by rescuing him from a moralizing or regimented historicism.

17 For more on Phillips's use of *Newton's Journal of Slave Trader* (1787), see Bénédicte Ledent, *Caryl Phillips* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2002), 121–22.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.46 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Furthermore, the situating of Hamilton's narrative in relation to several others in the novel that seem remote temporally and spatially further challenges a sequential supersessionist model of diasporic progression, something clinched by the novel's rejection of the historical time of consanguineous ancestry in its final chapter, "Somewhere in England," through its creative engagement with the forced adoptability of mixed-race British-born children conceived during World War II.[18] And as Stef Craps has noted in his comments on *Higher Ground* (1989), Phillips's novels by no means simply add Jewish fortunes, *a la* Bhabha, to a lengthening list of anachronistic diasporic relations, but instead "criticize or problematize such an approach"[19] in steadfastly refusing to presume the equivalence or accessibility of other people's distress.

As regards the disciplinary position of postcolonial studies, Cheyette's critique of supersessionism offers a highly important lesson. The legitimacy of postcolonial studies has been questioned in recent years not least by those who attempt to assign it to an earlier, foundational moment of critical thinking in order to announce the arrival of new, more flexible or attentive paradigms that have superseded postcolonialism: the "decolonial," cosmopolitanism, global literature, World Literature (and "world-literature"), and so forth. As Cheyette warns, we should be rightly suspicious of work announced in the name of the "new." Let us ever be vigilant to the allure of presentism. Given the murderous business of our "colonial present," the mothballing of postcolonial thought at this time has serious consequences for both responsible theory and praxis. We might heed the wisdom of Cheyette's advocacy of "travelling" concepts, one that charts their deferral and diasporic development as they shape-shift across contexts, never entirely forgetting the meanings they bring with them but welcoming at the same time their repurposing and repositioning. Mindful of the binary schema upheld by supersessionist thought, we might continue to push beyond the reductive polarisations that constrain the field—materialism versus culturalism, memory versus history, nation versus diaspora, postcolonial versus Jewish—as we theorize a postcolonial critique properly attuned to the intersecting, entangled conditions that require a praxis both considered and humane. As Cheyette's essay exemplifies, much is made when we sit down in discomfiting paradigms that set ourselves (conceptually, intellectually, politically) at odds and seek instead to think transfiguratively. Happily, such work is already at large. Robert Spencer's commendable endeavor to negotiate an intensely political rendition of cosmopolitanism in order to confront the neoliberal world order sustains a critical, properly sceptical encounter with postcolonial thought considered dynamic rather than foundational or as a waning antecedent soon to be replaced. His engagement across debates within the field ultimately refuses to uphold received divisions and shapes a stirring negotiation of cosmopolitanism as an ethically grounded, politically savvy, and "traveling" concept: "a cosmopolitanism capable of combining difference with community, local and national solidarities with larger trans-national ones."[20]

18 For a detailed reading of "Somewhere in England" in these terms, see McLeod, *Life Lines*, 197–210.
19 Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 95.
20 Robert Spencer, *Cosmopolitan Criticism and Postcolonial Literature* (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 35.

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Like Adorno, let us be careful to catch our breath. The actions that Catherine McKinley took as a young woman, chasing her presumed bloodline in terms of a foundational identity as legitimately and exaltedly African American, led instead to a whole new set of relations that brought together myriad lines and times of cultural connection, beckoning Jewish and other domains into the frame. Without the means to think across these lines, troubled by a sense of personhood as split rather than spliced, an emotionally coruscating experience awaited her. Nuance and complexity are necessary for theory and for praxis; proper action requires each. The incipient temporality expressed by the conjunctions in Cheyette's subtitle—old *and* new, Jews *and* postcolonialism, the ghetto *and* diaspora—demand a different time for thought, coordinated and unhinged all at once, beyond the patrilineal designs of discrete disciplinarity and crude historicism. His essay's contribution to that vital task of figuring out as a vital mode of transfiguring thought is welcome indeed.

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