

Daniel Boyarin

## Jewish Cricket

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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. (112)

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 “triumph of *Geistigkeit* over sensuality, or, strictly speaking, an instinctual renunciation” (112)—characteristics encoded as sublime, male, and Protestant in Freud’s cultural

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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 Maghrebi 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.<sup>2</sup>

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

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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:<sup>3</sup>

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.

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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 mistaking 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.

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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.<sup>4</sup> For the Jews no more invented “transcendental imperialism” than the Indians or the Jamaicans invented cricket.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Seshadri-Crooks 185. On Bose in general, Seshadri-Crooks is illuminating.

<sup>2</sup>When 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

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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.

<sup>3</sup>Spivak 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).

<sup>4</sup>In 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).

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