Circumcising Zionism, Queering Diaspora

REVIVING ALBERT MEMMI'S PENIS

Jarrod Hayes

'The Diaspora must cease to be a Diaspora.' With these words, the Jewish Tunisian writer Albert Memmi places his hope for Jewish liberation in the realisation of the Zionist project through the modern state of Israel (Liberation 286). Memmi would later confirm his assertion of the Israeli state as the essence of Jewishness: 'Israel is the heart and the head. Israel is now our heart of hearts ... but the Diaspora is the great, suffering body' (Jews 67). Through a mind/body binary, Memmi presents diasporic identities as degraded, inauthentic, as the corporeal supplement to a Jewish essence. This understanding of Jewishness stands in stark contrast with anti-Semitic racialisations of Jews as pure embodiment (see Gilman), but is Memmi's project the only possible route towards Jewish liberation? For those for whom diaspora is the 'essence' of Jewish identity, would Memmi's project not signify annihilation? Memmi himself states that 'the existence of a Jewish nation will at last permit the disappearance of Jewishness' (Liberation 301). According to Ammiel Alcalay, state Zionism is founded on precisely such a desire: 'Official discourse spoke matter-of-factly of the “elimination of the Diaspora”, a slogan that even slipped into the “elimination of the Jews”’ (221).1 When Memmi writes, 'The Jew has to find a total solution' (Liberation 277), he not only suggests the disturbing implications of the 'disappearance' he envisions, but also conjures up a resonance with the final solution.

Yet, whereas Memmi understands returning to Israel as a remedy for the uprootedness that characterises his vision of diaspora, in this essay I seek out alternative returns within Memmi's work itself. Memmi did not come to his explicitly pro-Zionist position right away. He was first known for his theorisation of the situation of the colonised, his anti-colonial writings and his support for Arab nationalism. His first essays, included in Portrait du colonisé, précédé de Portrait du colonisateur (1957, The Colonizer and the Colonized), are directly related to his first, semi-autobiographical novel — La Statue de sel (1953, The Pillar of Salt). In this Bildungsroman, Memmi revives Jewish identity through a different kind of narrative, which plants roots not in Palestine, but in a predominantly Arab North Africa. In a later interview, Memmi would redeploy the same heart/mind rhetoric used to describe Israel above: 'Many of my readers ... themselves have a Hara in their hearts and minds' (Terre 12, my trans.). Here, however, he reverses his previous associations, so that the Hara — Tunis's Jewish quarter — becomes the heart and reason of Jewish identity. This statement conjures up the ghosts that haunt Memmi's Zionism, ghosts of the very diaspora he has condemned to death.

Whereas Memmi's return to a collective past in the Hara might at first seem to parallel Zionist narratives that claim to return the Nation of Israel to its pre-diaspora origins, by reading Memmi's first novel against his later Zionist essays, one can revive the ghosts of a diasporic body left to die in the latter.2 And this body returns with its Jewishness inscribed onto the site of the circumcised penis, a site of difference from and connection with the Arab world of which Memmi is a part. If Alcalay describes a body of Arab Jewish texts from Israel in which the promised land has become a land of uprootedness and broken promises, Memmi's early fiction re-roots Jewish identity in a Hara of the mind. If Alcalay 'remakes Levantine culture' (to quote his subtitle) by deconstructing the Arab/Jew opposition, Memmi situates this Levant in a reconceived Mediterranean culture in which Orient/West and North/South binaries are also undone. Traditionally, the circumcised penis is a sign of man's alliance with God; it is thus the place where a phallocentric genealogy is inscribed onto the male body, making him a member of the Nation of Israel. (As Howard Elber-Schwartz writes, 'one must have a member to be a member' [145]). Yet this site upon which patriarchy is founded nonetheless signifies the potential for its undoing, for circumcision also marks the feminisation of the male Israeliite
The Diapora must come to an end. With these words, the Jewish Tunisian writer Albert Memmi places his hope for Jewish liberation in the realization of the Zion project through the modern state of Israel (1948). Memmi would later confirm his assertion of the Israeli state as the essence of Jewishness: "Israel is the heart and the head. Israel is now our heart of hearts...but the Diapora is the great, suffering body (Jews 6)." Through this lens, Memmi presents diaspora identities as degraded, inauthentic, as the corporeal supplement to a Jewish essence. This understanding of Jewishness stands in stark contrast with the spiritualized conceptions of Jews as a pure embodiment (see Gilman), but it is Memmi’s project the only possible route toward Jewish liberation. For those for whom diaspora is the ‘essence’ of Jewish identity, Memmi’s project not simply in direct opposition to antiblackness but in a larger sense, Memmi’s project is a rejection of the idea that the existence of a Jewish nation will at last permit the disappearance of Jewishness (Lebanon 197). According to Ammiel Alcalay, state Zionism is founded on precisely such a desire: ‘Official discourse spoke matter-of-factly of the “elimination of the Diaspora,” a slogan that even slipped into the “elimination of the Jews” (220). When Memmi writes, ‘[T]he Jews have to find a total solution’ (Lebanon 277), he not only signifies the disturbing implication of ‘elimination’ but also conjures up a resonance with the final solution. Yet, whereas Memmi understands returning to Israel as a remedy for the uprootedness that characterizes his vision of diaspora, in this essay I seek out alternative returns within Memmi’s work itself. Memmi did not come to his explicitly pro-Zionist position right away. He was first known for his theorization of the situation of the colonized, his anti-colonial sentiments, and his support for Arab nationalism. His first essays, included in Païoù du colonial, prédécat du Païoù du colonial (1957), The Colonizer and the Colonized, and therefore the threat of negating the masculinity that undergirds the Zionism upon which the Israeli state is founded. By being the amputated diasporic penis back to life, therefore—that is, by bringing it back from the past as well as reviving it as a source of pleasure—the Pillar of Salt revives Jewish identity through alternative roots, which will also serve as a point of departure for some reflections on the emerging field of queer diaspora studies. Memmi’s work can thus be situated in relation to a body of writing on Jewish masculinity. In The Jew’s Body, for example, Sandor Gilman examines and identifies constructions of the Jewish male body as feminized and therefore degenerate. Conversely, both Daniel Boyarin (in “This We Know to Be the Carnal Israel”: Circumcision and the Erotic Life of God and Israel? and Elbert-Schwartze (in God’s Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Mononothism) seek to reclaim this femininity in an explicitly feminist reconceptualization of Jewish masculinity by valorizing what anti-semitic discourses object, and recuperating the traditional feminization of men in biblical and rabbinic writings. Both have also described circumcision as a key component of this feminization. Boyarin describes circumcision as making the Jewish man “open to receive the divine speech and vision of God” (495). Since “God is the husband to Israel the wife” (97), according to Elbert-Schwartze, “men may meet God only as women” (74). Boyarin discusses more recent implications of this feminization in Liberotic Conductor: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Inversion of the Jewish Body (though he is careful to limit his findings to Ashkenazi traditions and warn against seeing a continuity in the parallel between ancient and rabbinic writings on the one hand and pre-nineteenth-century northern European Jewish cultures on the other, his conclusions are nonetheless relevant for understanding Memmi’s relation to Zionism. For the consolidation of Zionism in nineteenthcentury Europe required a regulation of this feminization to assert Israel as a nation of many men among nations of men. Given that the Zionist state establishes an Ashkenazi hegemony at the expense of Arab Jews, the parallel feminized diasporic body in Memmi’s early fiction, without explicitly resisting the Zionist masculinization that finds its epiphanies in Max Nordau’s ‘Muscular Jew’, nonetheless returns to haunt this masculinization. The Pillar of Salt’s narrative is framed as the childhood memories of its narrator Alexandre Mendes Boulleau. The chapter “At the Koutoubia School” offers a mise-en-abime of the reconstructive structure when Alexandre, after witnessing a peculiar scene in a network of a high-school student, looks back on an earlier childhood episode within the overall looking back of the novel. In the streetcar episode, a grocer facing the island of the two-year-old Muslim boy for teasing his quality of whether he is circumcised. When the boy’s father says no, the grocer attempts to “purchase” the boy’s penis at higher and higher prices and, as the series of escalating offers reaches, reaches into the boy’s pants and pretends to snatch his penis without paying. In this lesson of phallic privilege, the little boy fights off the aggressor and defends his penis against the threat of castration. Even as the game begins, the narrator identifies with his victim across theo-confessional lines: Quite obviously, the boy knew this whole routine and had already heard the same proposition before. I, too, knew it all, and had myself played the game some years ago, attacked by other aggressors and feeling the same emotions of shame [and sexual excitement, of revolt and complicitous curiosity]. The child’s eyes sparkled with the pleasure of his awareness of his own growing vitality, and with the shock of his revolt against such an unwanted attack. (167; 186) This identification is so strong that the narrator experiences a physical sensation in his penis, which he takes to be the same as what the little boy is feeling:

When the boy in the streetcar screamed with fear, I felt my own [sex] quiver as if in response to [a call saying] suddenly from the depths of my own childhood... Yes, I knew that unpleasant but voluptuous [shoved]. Before going to grade school, I used to go to the koutoubia... (169-70; 188)

This sensation, like that evoked by the Proustian Madeleine, revives an identical feeling from his much earlier past, thereby bringing an entire scene into the present. One day at the Koutoubia, or Hebrew school, after the rabbi leaves the room, a class of boys decides to stage a circumcision ceremony. They choose the smallest among them to be circumcised, and yet again, Memmi’s narrator identifies with the frightened victim, so totally in fact that he experiences the very same fear:

But the mere threat had bound me closely to the victim and set off inside me all the terror of a real cañary. I could feel the anguish of the small boy who, all trembling, was now being carried, like the sacrificial lamb, on the shoulders of our [monitor]...(172-73; 192)

Since the boy is already circumcised, the excitement that drives their play-acting is, to a great extent, the tension and fear that the boy might ‘really’ be ‘circumcised’ again, which would necessarily involve the removal of something other than a foreskin.

My heart beat faster, under the pressure of fear and [embarrassed] emotion... Were they really going to cut off his penis? The more though of it gave me a vague but not unpleasant pain in my [groin]... (172; 192)

He again experiences this identification as a physical sensation at the site of his own penis, which tingles with excitement. This scene occurs climactically, and quite literally
so, since the narrator describes his own reaction as an explosion of jouissance:

It was physically intolerable, and I felt truly faint when the High Priest’s right hand, armed with a razor, came slowly down toward the tiny bit of white flesh that [protruded] between the index and the second finger of his left hand.

But my sense of having been liberated was sudden, and all my fear vanished explosively, together with my shame, my jouissance, my disgust, and the unbearable tension that was born of the anguished silence of all of us: unable to stand it any longer, the victim had just burst into tears. (174–75; 193)

These passages could serve as textbook examples of what D Boyarin has called ‘jewissance’, a pleasure that comes from ‘an extraordinary richness of experience and a powerful sense of being rooted somewhere in the world, in a world of memory, intimacy, and connectedness’ (Unheroic xxi). Jewissance à la Memmi is much more concrete than Boyarin’s pleasures of the mind and of being a member of a collective identity; Memmi’s jouissance is a physical pleasure emanating from his member:

[In my sex, I felt this voluptuous fear translate into electric shivers.] How shall I ever forget my complicity? Yes, I was playing my part in the ceremony, in the ancestral and collective ritual that was food for the mind. (174; 193)

In fact, Memmi’s jouissance is a jouissance in all the meanings of the word; il jouit de sa judaïté. That is, he enjoys, benefits from, and relishes in his Jewishness, which also makes him cum. In this passage, at least, the liberation of a particular jew (‘my sense of being liberated’) takes on quite different contours from those outlined in The Liberation of the Jew. Furthermore, his penis not only makes him quintessentially Jewish, but also connects him to other penises, those of other Jewish men. Though his circumcised penis inserts him into a phallic understanding of Jewish identity, however, the circumcision that writes this Jewishness onto his penis also signifies his emasculation: ‘[My groin ached [at the same spot] as if the knife were about to wound me’ (Pillar 174; 193). And although the narrator shares this threat, the possibility of castration is an inextricable component of his physical pleasure.

Yet whereas his circumcised penis is supposedly what defines him as Jewish (and being Jewish supposedly means he cannot be Christian or Muslim), it actually gives him an intimate connection with those from whom he is supposed to be different. The most intimate connection is reserved for the Muslim penis, which tingles in complete sync with the narrator’s own (at least as the two are brought together in the imaginary space created through remembrance). For identification with/through the penis is a tactile process: ‘Will I ever be able to forget the Orient, since it is grafted into my flesh, and it is enough to touch myself to verify its definitive mark?’ (188 in the French, my trans.). And we remember that it is indeed by touching the uncircumcised penis that the Djerbian (and through him, the other men present) participates in a collective experience of circumcision. In the space of the streetcar, ‘[a]ll the races of our city were represented’ (166):

‘Decidedly, among Mediterraneans, we felt like family’ (187 in the French, my trans.). This rhetoric of kinship unites Jewish, Muslim, French, Bedouin, Sicilian and Djerbian, and it is precisely this genealogy, this ‘Orient … grafted into my flesh’, that marks his penis not only with Jewish difference, but also as being in relation with non-Jewish Mediterraneans. The streetcar thus serves as a metaphor for a diasporic Jewish identity, for in it Alexandre experiences his jouissance as he and his fellow travellers (get in) touch (with) their penises along the shared routes to their identities rooted in collective memories. The streetcar scene might therefore be read as a circle jerk in which Memmi’s narrator only gets in touch with his Jewislness by figuratively touching other penises.

In a later chapter of The Pillar of Salt, this figurative contact is literalised in Memmi’s characterisation of the homoerotic nature of a specifically Mediterranean sexuality:

I had never been able to [approve of] the sexual games of boys. When I was told that one of the older pupils offered to caress, with enough skill to cause an orgasm [jusqu’à la jouissance], anyone who wished, I refused with scorn and horror. My comrades organized these parties of collective pleasure out on a vacant lot not far from the school. Apparently, they all lined up with their backs to the wall and Giacomo passed [in front of them] one by one. I was the only one in the [lounge for the boarders’ monitors] not to talk of my adventures or to describe with [self-indulgence] the sexual attributes of men and women a thousand times a day. To me, such promiscuity was [in very bad taste]; besides, what had I to tell? (239–40; 257–58)

As in the streetcar scene, here both Northern and Southern Mediterraneans share a sexuality that is most notable for its lack of a clear distinction between homo- and heterosexuality. Yet, the very passage that admits the homoerotic nature of this community of men bound through the connections they feel in their penises serves to deny the narrator’s participation in its homoeroticism. Furthermore, Alexandre certainly knows a lot about something he has supposedly never done, enough to repeat in great detail descriptions from which he apparently recoiled in horror.

In a previous reading of these and other passages from The Pillar of Salt, I situated these erotic scenarios from Alexandre’s past within the novel’s narrative of colonial assimilation and alienation (Queer Nations 243–47, 253–55, 277–86). There, I understood Memmi’s denial of being implicated in the ‘parties of collective pleasure’ as part of a narrative of sexual development that parallels the civilising process of Alexandre’s colonial assimilation. As Memmi’s
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As in the streets and a town, both Northerners and Southern Mediternians share a sexuality that is most notable for its lack of a clear distinction between homo- and heterosexuality. Yet, the very adaptability of the heterosexual nature of our community can open broad possibilities for connections they feel in their penises serves to deviate the participants in their homosexualism. Furthermore, Alexandria certainly knows a lot about something he has supposedly never done, even to repeat in great detail descriptions from which he apparently recalled in horror.

In a previous reading of these and other passages from The Pillar of Salt, I advocated an intimate connection with those from whom he is supposed to be different. The most intimate connection is reserved for the Muslim women, who have a complete sync with the narrator's own (at least it is the two are brought together in the imaginary space created through memories). Reconnection with the penis is a torture process: "Will ever be able to forget the Orient, since it is grafted into my flesh, and it is enough to touch myself to verify its definitive mark?" (still in the French, my trans.). And we are led to ask: is there anything (at this point) in the gesture, in his innocence, in his shame, in his Jehovahism, my disgust, and the unbearable tension that was born of the annihilated silence of all of us, unable to stand the name of the Christian killer, the victim had just been killed. (74-75; 193)

These passages could serve as (excellent) examples of what D. Boyarin has called "Jewessian", a pleasure that comes from an extraordinary richness of experience and a powerful sense of being rooted somewhere in the world, in a world of memory, intimacy, and connectedness" (161; 161). To be Jewessian is to be more concrete than the Baconian pleasures of the mind and of being a member of a collective identity, Memmi's Jewessian is a physical pleasure emanating from his member:

In my sex, I felt this voluptuous fear translate into electric shivers. How shall I ever forget my complicity? Yes, I was playing my part in the ceremony, in the ancestral and collective ritual that was food for the mind. (74-75; 193)

In fact, Memmi's Jewessian is a Jewessian in all the meanings of the word; it is a Jewessian (in the sense of being 'liberated') takes on quite different contours from those outlined in The Liberation of the Jews. Furthermore, his penis not only makes him quasi-Jewishly, but also connects him to other penis, those of other Jewish men. Though his circumcised penis makes him a phallic understanding of Jewish identity, however, the circumcision that writes this Jewessian onto his penis also signifies his emasculation: "My groin ached at the same spot as if the knife were about to wound me" (Pillar 74). Both through the narrative and the screening of this traumatic experience of circumcision is an inextricable component of his physical pleasure. Yet whereas his circumcised penis is supposedly what makes him as Jewussian, his circumcision supposedly means he can be Christian or Muslim, it actually gives him an intimate connection with those from whom he is supposed to be different. The most intimate connection is reserved for the Muslim women, who have a complete sync with the narrator's own (at least it is the two are brought together in the imaginary space created through memories). For identification with the penis is a torture process: "Will ever be able to forget the Orient, since it is grafted into my flesh, and it is enough to touch myself to verify its definitive mark?" (still in the French, my trans.). And we are led to ask: is there anything (at this point) in the gesture, in his innocence, in his shame, in his Jehovahism, my disgust, and the unbearable tension that was born of the annihilated silence of all of us, unable to stand the name of the Christian killer, the victim had just been killed. (74-75; 193)

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us to a system of kinship reckoned through men and suggests the questions of legitimacy in paternity that patriarchy generates. (245)

Clifford’s assertion that ‘[d]iasporic experiences are always gendered’ (313) is thus quite an understatement. The very concept of diaspora itself implies a masculinist definition of the relation between community and origins. The patrilinealism implied by the term and upon which the notion of diaspora frequently relies nonetheless frequently remains hidden whenever the term is evoked.

In Gopinath’s specific context, again, nation and diaspora are seen as much more compatible (at least in the hegemonic models of diasporism she critiques) than within Zionist discourses. Her retrieval of queerness within diaspora thus leads directly to a queering of the nation. It is probably the case, however, that diaspora haunts the nation differently for Zionism, which actually envisions the elimination of diaspora. One can thus not only locate queerness within the diaspora, but also understand diaspora as having a queer relation to Israel (as both biblical nation and modern state). In contrast with Gopinath’s project, Memmi’s retrieval of the Jewish diaspora as queer helps to imagine the undoing of Zionism as a political project (as opposed to queering the Israeli state) by allowing the rhizomatic connections of diaspora to return in the process of returning to origins in a homeland of the mind (as opposed to a physical territory already inhabited by Palestinians). Memmi thus allows us to carry forward Gopinath’s queering of diaspora by helping us to tease out the queer potential of the very concept of diaspora itself.

While Memmi’s revival of his penis relies on the same phallic genealogy Helmreich alludes to, his Jewissance entails spilling his seed rather differently. Indeed, it is not through heterosexual reproduction that he plants the seeds for a Zionist state; rather, the promised land flows forth like milk and honey every time he touches himself “to verify [the] definitive mark of the Orient”. J and D Boyarin retrieve a feminised diasporic anti-Zionism by performing ‘the double mark of the male Jew’, that is, their circumcision and head-covering, thereby undoing the body/mind opposition Memmi’s Zionism relies on (‘Self-Exposure’ 16–22). Yet whereas they write (about) their penises, Memmi has a wank. Indeed, ‘the covenant with God was of a sexual nature’ for Memmi (Pillar 171). But instead of getting in touch with God as he touches himself, Memmi touches (the penises of) fellow Arabs. The home of Jewish identity is thus not a state that pushes out the Other; rather Muslim and Jewish penises rub together in an acknowledgement that they both share an alliance with God signed by Abraham. The Nation of Israel that comes into being through a kind of circle jerk with (other) Arabs makes for a rather queer Zionism, which is more like no Zionism at all.

Indeed, Memmi shows us that the very narrative structure upon which Zionism relies offers a strategy for its undoing. The gesture of looking back is itself evoked by the novel’s title; The Pillar of Salt is a biblical reference to Lot’s wife who—disobeying God’s command not to look back on a burning Sodom—turns into a pillar of salt. Memmi explicitly connects his fate to hers:

I am dying [from] having turned back [on myself]. It is forbidden to see oneself, and I have [finished knowing] myself. [Like Lot’s wife, whom God turned into a pillar of salt, can I still live beyond my gaze?] (335; 368)

Since Memmi looks back on himself as Lot’s wife looked upon Sodom, he equates his own past with Sodom. Furthermore, Memmi’s use of the verb to know recalls the very reason for Sodom’s destruction:

[The men of Sodom, compassed the house round ... And they called unto Lot, and said unto him, Where are the men which came in to thee this night? bring them out unto us, that we may know them. (Gen. 19: 4–5)]

Memmi’s use of ‘knowing’ can thus also be read in the biblical sense. When knowing oneself is the equivalent of touching oneself (which is the equivalent of touching the penises of other Jews and Arabs), the mind/body binary upon which Memmi founds his explicitly Zionist position begins to collapse as surely as the city of Sodom. As with the Hara, however, there will always be a Sodom of the mind. ‘Next year in Jerusalem’, then, can become the equivalent of ‘Tonight in Sodom’, as Zion surges from every wank in a certain streetcar named desire.

Notes

1 Alcalay is quoting Segev (117–18).
2 The expression ‘Nation of Israel’ will be used throughout this essay in its biblical sense to distinguish it from the modern Israeli state.
3 ‘Dealing equally with the significance of roots and routes’ is one way Paul Gilroy reconsiders Africana studies through the concept of diaspora (190).
4 On Nordau, see Gilman (53–54) and D Boyarin (Unheroic, 76–77, 277).
5 Where I have altered (in brackets) the published translation, the second page reference is to the French original.
6 They also explicitly link their reclaiming of male femininity with this rerouting of Jewish roots (J Boyarin and D Boyarin, ‘Self-Exposure’). See also J Boyarin (Palestine) for an example of his individual contribution to anti-Zionist writing.
7 Gopinath (5) also quotes Helmreich.
8 This essay (35) also offers a brief discussion of The Pillar of Salt, one J Boyarin includes in Thinking in Jewish (58–60).

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Notes
1. Alcalay is quoting Segal (1971-78).
2. The expression 'nation of Israel' will be used throughout this essay in its biblical sense to distinguish it from the modern Israeli state.
3. "Living equally with the rights of roots and routes" is one way Paul Gilroy reconceives African studies through the concept of diaspora (1996).
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6. They also explicitly lack their reclaiming of male femininity with this recoupling of Jewish roots (B. Boyarin and B. Boyarin, "Self-Exposure"). See also J. Boyarin (1997) for an example of his ideological contribution to anti-Zionist writing.
8. This essay (ibid) also offers a brief discussion of the Pillar of Salt, one J. Boyarin includes in Thinking in Jewish (ibid).

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