

# Introduction

I am the last Jewish intellectual. You do not know anyone else like that. All the other Jewish intellectuals are masters from the suburbs. From Amos Oz to those who live here in America, so that I am the last one, the authentic follower of Adorno. I will articulate it like this: I am a Jewish Palestinian.

EDWARD SAID, "MY RIGHT OF RETURN"

## "Nous sommes tous des juifs allemands"

In November 1967, at a seemingly peripheral suburban outpost campus of the University of Paris, a handful of students calling themselves *les enragés*<sup>1</sup> initiated a university boycott over a series of government educational initiatives called the Fouchet Reforms.<sup>2</sup> What began as a squabble over required lab sessions and educational bureaucracy climaxed by May 1968 in a national uprising. At stake was not merely the structure of the university or anything as concrete as fair wages or work hours. Rather, the students aimed for a complete cultural transformation, the dismantling of structures of power, the elevation of freedom and creativity to the highest echelon of value. The walls of the Sorbonne were painted with demands: "It is forbidden to forbid," "All power to the imagination," "Answer exams with questions," "We want a world, new and original,"

*Epigraph:* Edward Said, "My Right of Return," reprinted in *Power, Politics and Culture: Interviews with Edward W. Said*, ed. Gauri Viswanathan (New York: Pantheon, 2001), 458.

1. A reference to one of the radical factions of the 1789 revolution.

2. For an analysis of why the protests began in Nanterre, see Alain Touraine, *The May Movement: Revolt and Reform*, trans. Leonard F. X. Mayhew (New York: Random House, 1971), 120–55.

"We refuse a world where the assurance of not dying from hunger is exchanged for the risk of dying from boredom."<sup>3</sup> At the center of this idealism was an unlikely French hero: the German Jew Daniel Cohn-Bendit. While refusing to claim for himself a role of leadership, resisting the very terms of authority, Cohn-Bendit was, nonetheless, both catalyst and symbol of the movement.<sup>4</sup> His status as foreigner and Jew made him a lightning rod, signaling as it did the radical nature of the students' demands, their dissociation from the old guard, and their rejection of French patriotism as an unquestionable value. At no moment was that clearer than on May 23, when the government announced that he would be blocked from reentering France.<sup>5</sup>

During the third week of May, tides had begun to turn against the student movement; spirits were low, and there was a lull in action. The Council of Ministers, sensing a return to order, issued the prohibition against Cohn-Bendit's reentry. This government decision reignited the students' fervor almost immediately.<sup>6</sup> Responding to the news broadcast over Paris radio, the crowds, without directive, organization, or planning, reassembled spontaneously. The same energy that many thought had finally been drained out of the protests animated the marchers and brought the protests to a head.<sup>7</sup> Pouring into the Place St. Michel, and heading en masse toward Montparnasse, thousands joined their voices in the streets, uniting under the cry: "Nous sommes tous des juifs allemands."<sup>8</sup> Under the banner of this cry, the students initiated a new wave

3. Andrew Feenberg and Jim Freedman, *When Poetry Ruled the Streets: The French May Events of 1968* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 38.

4. Cohn-Bendit first gained notoriety in 1966 when he faced expulsion from Nanterre for having disrupted the dedication of new campus athletic buildings, by publicly reproaching the minister of youth and sport for not having addressed the issue of sexuality in his white paper on youth. Touraine, *The May Movement*, 139.

5. Cohn-Bendit had made a brief trip to Germany and the Netherlands to help spread the student movement but was prohibited from returning. He nonetheless found his way back to Paris. According to his own account, he walked through the forest from Germany into France and "took a comfortable car to Paris." See Feenberg and Freedman, *When Poetry Ruled the Streets*, 62. See also Laurent Joffrin, *Mai 68: Histoire des événements* (Paris: Seuil, 1988), 212.

6. Feenberg and Freedman, *When Poetry Ruled the Streets*, 50.

7. On May 23, 1968, *Le monde* reported that with this decision the government had "once more failed to estimate the risks involved." One distinctive element of this moment is the fact that it marks a split between the students and the Communist Party and CGT (Confédération général du travail), which did not condemn the interdiction order against Cohn-Bendit and subsequently planned their own protests. See Joffrin, *Mai 68*, 213.

8. The chant was derived from posters made by the action committee at the École des beaux-arts that showed Cohn-Bendit's face. One poster read: "Nous sommes tous des juifs et des allemands." Another read: "Nous sommes tous 'indésirables.'" See Jonathan Judaken, *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question: Anti-Antisemitism and the Politics of the French Intellectual* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 220.

of combat that lasted into the following day and culminated almost a week later in de Gaulle's May 29 dramatic departure from the capital.

On one level, the function of the slogan "We are all German Jews" was straightforward: it was a rallying cry, a statement of solidarity with the movement's leader and a response to the suspicion voiced in the Gaullist and Communist press that the ferment was being stirred up by foreign instigators.<sup>9</sup> Capitalizing on the historical resonances between the de Gaulle government's action and the Vichy government's anti-Jewish legislation of 1940 and 1941, which included provisions with restrictions on traveling Jews and authorizing the internment of those Jews who were foreign born, this slogan allowed for the easy (although obviously unfair) analogy between the de Gaulle government, Petain, and, by proxy, National Socialism.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the phrase underscored the position of the students as victims of an oppressive and authoritative regime. Simultaneously, it reenacted the ideal of *fraternité*, as illustrated by the students' insistence that nothing separated their status from that of their foreign-born Jewish leader.

Given this interpretation, the students' expression of solidarity may seem like a demonstration of the French republican spirit, one that recalls the position of the Dreyfusards some seventy years earlier. The intellectuals and politicians who defended Alfred Dreyfus, the Jewish French army captain accused of treason in 1894, were also fighting for the rights of an individual suspected of foreign sensibilities; they too rallied for justice in the name of a brotherhood that transcends the particularity of origins.<sup>11</sup> This parallel, however, does not take into account one remarkable difference: during the Dreyfus affair, those who rallied for Dreyfus's cause did so in the name of the Enlightenment ideal of humanity, an ideal uniting men above and beyond their differences.<sup>12</sup> They protested the suspicion directed at Dreyfus *as a Jew* and established their solidarity with him as a man and as a French citizen. As Émile Zola famously wrote to President Faure: "I have but one passion, that of the

9. Mark Poster, *Existential Marxism in Postwar France: From Sartre to Althusser* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 392.

10. On the use of references to Nazi Germany in the May '68 revolt, see Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville, *Red Flag/Black Flag: French Revolution 1968* (New York: Putnam's, 1968), 29.

11. On the role of memory in May '68, see Raymond Aron, *La Révolution introuvable* (Paris: Fayard, 1968), translated by Gordon Clough as *The Elusive Revolution: Anatomy of a Student Revolt* (New York: Praeger, 1969). Aron describes the student revolt as a psychodrama, as the acting out or mimicking of revolution, where the participants referenced the heroes and scoundrels of past revolutions, role-playing according to their self-understood position in the conflict (33–34; 21–23).

12. This is, of course, something of an oversimplification. Chapter 1 complicates this narrative by considering the cases of Charles Péguy and Bernard Lazare.

Enlightenment, in the name of the humanity that has suffered so much and that has a right to happiness.”<sup>13</sup> Dreyfus’s Judaism was, for his supporters, almost beside the point.

The student protestors of May ’68, in contrast, allied themselves with Cohn-Bendit by adopting his Jewish identity. They protested, not in the name of an idea of humanity, but in the name of “the Jew”; instead of claiming the status of the universal for Cohn-Bendit, they claimed the status of exception, of Jewish particularity, for themselves.<sup>14</sup>

From the very beginning, this statement sparked controversy. For some, it was a revolutionary moment in politics, marking a new form of political expression; for others, it was an occasion for skepticism and disgust. In *The Imaginary Jew*, Alain Finkielkraut, the child of two Jewish war refugees, describes his ambivalence over the slogan as a sincere sense of pride and victory that the identity of the Jew had developed a signification worthy of identification combined with a sense of infraction at the realization that with this identification the Jew lost the position of exception. He felt, he writes, as if he had been despoiled, the treasure of his identity “sullied [*galvaudait*].”<sup>15</sup> Out of this reaction, Finkielkraut develops a critique of the political impulse to identify with the outsider. Jews, he argues in his 2003 volume *Au nom de l’autre*, are the victims of this impulse, not its beneficiaries. For this desire to identify with the other marks a turn on the Left toward a “regime of equivalence” that is, he suggests, partially responsible for the newest form of anti-Semitism.<sup>16</sup> More recently, Finkielkraut noted with disgust the statement made by Edward Said, quoted by Tzvetan Todorov in a eulogy, that he was the last of the Jews. The claim to be the new Jews, “the ethical Jews,” is for Finkielkraut the latest frontier, the latest battle to deprive “the ethnic Jews” of even their

13. “Je n’ai qu’une passion, celle de la lumière, au nom de l’humanité qui a tant souffert et qui a droit au bonheur” (“J’accuse,” *L’aurore*, January 13, 1898).

14. On the Jewish element of May ’68, see Judaken, *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question*, chaps. 7–8. Jean-Michel Chaumont argues that one can date the moment that difference—Jewish difference—entered on the political scene as a positive value. He argues that the change occurred in 1967 and points to a conference held in New York on Jewish cultural values after the Holocaust by the journal *Judaism*. What emerges among the interlocutors (Emil Fackenheim, Elie Wiesel, George Steiner, and Richard H. Popkin), according to Chaumont, is that the language of Jewish election begins to infuse the historical understanding of the Holocaust, and, with it, the need arises to distinguish Jewish suffering as exemplary of human suffering and, thus, both unique and universally significant. See Jean-Michel Chaumont, *La concurrence des victimes: Génocide, identité, reconnaissance* (Paris, La découverte, 1997), 101–5. For the proceedings of the conference, see “Jewish Values in the Post-Holocaust Future: A Symposium,” *Judaism*, no. 3 (1967): 266–99.

15. Alain Finkielkraut, *Le juif imaginaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), 26, translated by Kevin O’Neill and David Suchoff as *The Imaginary Jew* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 18.

16. Alain Finkielkraut, *Au nom de l’autre: Réflexions sur l’antisémitisme qui vient* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003).

identity.<sup>17</sup> For him, the potential for this slide has its origin in the slogan of 1968, in the use of Judaism as an emblem for victim and outsider, an emblem whose content is easily transferable.

Others have analyzed the slogan quite differently. In contrast with Finkielkraut, the novelist and literary critic Maurice Blanchot—who as a member of the Comité d'action étudiants-écrivains (Student Writers Action Committee) was deeply involved in the events—not only lauded the students' chant as one of the most powerful political acts in modern France, but also seemed to do so for the reason that Finkielkraut criticized the act: the students were taking up the position of the outsider, rather than defending their own Frenchness. For this very reason, Blanchot called it an “inaugural speech-event, opening and overturning borders.” Recalling Walter Benjamin's analysis of revolution in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” he went so far as to call the protestors' spontaneous initiation of the chant “messianic” in its dimensions.<sup>18</sup>

The philosopher Jacques Rancière in his frequent analyses of May '68 has exposed the complexity and political force behind what Finkielkraut dismisses as a usurpation of the position of the Jew. According to Rancière, the students' actions signaled quite the opposite. Rather than trying to possess the rightful position of an other, they were disavowing their own right to possess the legitimate identity of citizen. It was an incident of what he has termed *disidentification*. The students refused to identify with their own interest, their own social status, or their own nation-state.<sup>19</sup> Instead, they aligned themselves with a designation that could not, in fact, be assumed, one whose symbolic power derived from its inadmissibility. On the basis of this impossible association, they refused the terms of citizenship that defined them and resisted being counted among the French people. In making the term *German Jews* a “shared category,” the students did not usurp the position of an other but formed an identity whose very significance arose from the fact that it was “no longer sociologically classifiable.”<sup>20</sup>

According to Rancière's interpretation in *Aux bords du politique*, it is, in fact, the impropriety of the students' performance that makes it

17. Alain Finkielkraut, “Les juifs face à la religion de l'humanité,” *Le débat* 131 (September–October 2004): 15.

18. Maurice Blanchot, “Les actions exemplaires,” *Comité*, October 1, 1968, reprinted in Maurice Blanchot, *Écrits politiques, 1958–1993* (Paris: Lignes, 2003), 125, and Maurice Blanchot, *The Blanchot Reader*, trans. Christopher C. Stevens, ed. Michael Holland (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), 205.

19. Jacques Rancière, *La mésentente* (Paris: Galilée, 1995), 173, translated by Julie Rose as *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 127.

20. See Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 56; and Jacques Rancière, *Aux bords du politique* (Paris: La fabrique, 1998), 157.

effective and marks it as indicative of what he calls the entrance into the political sphere of “the cause of the Other.” It is not an identification with the victim but a refusal to identify with a “certain self,” the self that belongs to the nation. Thus, the chant does not mark the appearance of a new political subject; rather, it inverts “a stigmatized name in order to make it the principle of an open subjectivation of the uncounted, without confusing it with any representation of a socially identifiable group.”<sup>21</sup> In an act of disidentification, the students aligned themselves with a name that could not be appropriated. In doing so, they marked the gap between their own position and that of the French nation as well as the gap between the French nation’s account of the people and the people’s own account of themselves.

Rancière’s explanation effectively accounts for the political power of the chant and offers a powerful counternarrative to Finkielkraut’s assumption that the students had appropriated the status of victim, seized the position of tragic hero.<sup>22</sup> It ignores, however, the specificity of their claim. Rancière, in his analysis of the event, is interested in the negative element of the students’ gesture, the implication for those with whom the students chose *not* to identify. In that sense, *German Jews* functions as an empty signifier, one whose significance arises merely from its position as off-limits. It is clear that, in identifying with the German Jews, the students were identifying with those who had been made invisible, the annihilated. But is it not significant with whom the students did align themselves? To ignore the specificity of the students’ gesture ignores the very powerful resonance that *Jewishness* had acquired in France by 1968 and, thus, misses the power of the trope.

In identifying with German Jews, the students made a gesture that was far more historic than either Finkielkraut or Rancière have allowed. For it does not mark just a moment in the history of the role of the outsider in politics; it marks a turning point in the history of the significance of the Jew as French cultural and political symbol. In order to be restored to its proper importance, this moment has to be considered within a history of the meaning of this symbol. By 1968, the statement “We are all German Jews” resonated as a gesture of resistance against the dominant mode of identification, not only because the students could not themselves properly identify as German Jews, but also because the idea of the Jew had developed its own significance as a symbol of the improper: what does not belong and to which nothing properly belongs. As Paul

21. Rancière, *Aux bords du politique*, 157.

22. Finkielkraut, *Le juif imaginaire*, 25–45, and *The Imaginary Jew*, 17–34.

Celan wrote in 1959: “The Jew, you know, what does he have that properly belongs to him, that wasn’t borrowed, lent, and never returned.”<sup>23</sup>

## Sans Racines

As a symbol, the figure of the Jew has been marked in French history by its unstable meaning. It shifted from signifying an entrenched particularism in the eighteenth century to functioning as a metonym for abstract universalism by the time of the French Revolution’s centennial. Whatever the political ideal, the Jew was its antithesis. As a figure in the rhetoric of the 1789 revolution, it represented the negative image of the Enlightenment ideal. Prominent reformers described the Jew as a tribal remnant of an outmoded culture, a figure trenchantly attached to backward customs and superstition. The Jew was a symbol of particularism, which the Revolution was meant to overcome. One hundred years later, however, when the Catholic Right wanted to communicate its resistance to the Third Republic, its vocal leaders identified the cosmopolitan Jew as the secret victor of the 1789 revolution. Said to lack a relationship to French soil and, thus, to the natural world more generally, the cosmopolitan Jew, aligned with abstract reason rather than tradition, was seen as uprooted and in danger of corrupting the heritage of the true France.<sup>24</sup> The Jew was depicted as the wandering nomad, the foreigner who could claim no roots in France, or anywhere else for that matter.

As French ideals shifted, so too did the negative characteristics associated with the Jew. Out of the oscillation between these two poles emerges an ambivalent and paradoxical portrait of the Jew. Two seemingly opposed characteristics merge when the racialized stigma of the Jew comes to consist in the fact that the Jew is *sans racines* (without roots).

Before the Second World War, the valence of this characterization was clear. The values with which the Jew was associated were negative by definition. The rootless Jew was unable to shed the stigma of race, to claim the positive value of heritage and tradition. The Jew was quintessentially an outsider.

After the war, the figure of the Jew retained its symbolic status. Yet, in some moments, it gained a positive moral and political significance. Inadmissible in either of the dominant codes of constructing French identity—representing a resistance to an abstract humanism by its very

23. Paul Celan, “Gespräch im Gebirg,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, 5 vols. (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1983), 3:169–73.

24. See my discussions of Voltaire and Maurice Barrès in chapter 1.

exceptionality and the foil of foreignness to a French identity built on roots—it could be harnessed in its very negativity as a means to critique both political options. In identifying with the Jews, the students of May '68 announced their resistance to the available forms of political identity. In fact, they refused the very terms of identification. The position of outsider allocated to the Jew represented an alternative to the structures of allegiance put in place by both the universalist and the particularist models of French identity.<sup>25</sup> As a product of the racialized ideology of German and French fascism, the Jews came to represent “destabilization itself.”<sup>26</sup>

Twenty years after the 1968 uprising, the effect of the students' gesture could still be felt in Jean-François Lyotard's more self-conscious move to coin the term “*the jews*” in his 1988 book *Heidegger and “the jews.”* Lyotard, in the first paragraph of the book, clarifies that the term does not refer to any nation, ethnicity, or religious group but is, rather, a figure to describe “our lot . . . the lot of this nonpeople of survivors. Jews and non-jews . . . whose Being-together depends not on the authenticity of any primary roots but on that singular debt of interminable anamnesis.”<sup>27</sup> *Heidegger and “the jews”* was written in response to the 1987 publication in France of Victor Farias's controversial reexamination of Heidegger's role in the Nazi Party and was concerned to evaluate the relation between Heidegger's politics and his philosophy as well as the effect of this relation on French philosophy influenced by him.<sup>28</sup> More important, however, it made explicit the effects of the history of the representation of the Jew and mobilized this history toward the articulation of a concept that had been building since World War II. Like the slogan “*Nous sommes tous des juifs allemands,*” Lyotard's “*juifs*” made *Jewishness* a category that was seemingly open to anyone and everyone

25. For a synopsis of the way in which these two forces animate French politics and continue to affect discussions of multiculturalism in France, see Jeremy Jennings, “Citizenship, Republicanism and Multiculturalism in Contemporary France,” *British Journal of Political Science* 30 (2000): 575–98.

26. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *La fiction du politique: Heidegger, l'art et la politique* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1987), 139, translated by Chris Turner as *Heidegger, Art and Politics: The Fiction of the Political* (London: Blackwell, 1990), 96.

27. Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger et “les juifs”* (Paris: Galilée, 1988), 152, translated by Andreas Michel and Mark Roberts as *Heidegger and “the jews”* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 93.

28. Farias's work created an explosion of publicity in France because of its assertion that much of Heidegger's philosophical work bears the imprint of his sympathy with National Socialism. The very disclosure of this information does not, however, fully explain the vehemence of the reaction to Farias's book in France, which included newspaper articles, televised debates, and at least six book responses in the year or two following its publication. Much of the significant factual information about Heidegger's involvement in the party had already been disclosed in the posthumously published *Der Spiegel* interview and the reissue of the rectorate address in 1983, which coincided with the publication of Martin Heidegger, *Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universität* (Frankfurt a.M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 1983).

to take up. Yet it in fact functioned in such a way that no one could take it up, for it was symbolic of the disappropriation of identity; it was a name for a “nonpeople.” Insofar as the work thematized the figure of the Jew, it offered little that was not already familiar to a French readership. Lyotard was, rather, recycling a set of associations, associations that had developed as a consequence of anti-Semitism but had taken on a newly acquired positive value through the work of Jean-Paul Sartre and Emmanuel Levinas, then developed as a trope for disappropriation in the work of Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida. While Lyotard himself offered little that was new to this narrative, his willingness, not only to articulate the fact that the Jew had become in France a symbol, but also to adopt “*the jews*” as a positively imbued label for political marginality placed him at the center of a critical backlash. He became the target of a number of American critics interested in exposing, if not the latent anti-Semitism of such a representation, then at least its reductive and essentializing tendencies. As such, he was perfectly positioned to become in the American context the exemplar of all that was wrong with postmodern French thought.<sup>29</sup> Lyotard’s treatment of “*the jews*” subsequently reproduced on the American scene a reaction that recalls Finkielkraut’s response to the May ’68 slogan.

The critiques of Lyotard’s book centered on two claims: first, that Lyotard offered an essentialized representation of Jewishness, one that in its philo-Semitism was no better than anti-Semitic reductions;<sup>30</sup> second, that the book’s universalizing definition of *Jewishness* transformed the Jew into an allegorical figure, thus reproducing the supersession that first marked Christianity, consequently excluding “real Jews” from their position as proprietors of their own rightful identity. Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin were among the most outspoken critics of the work and clearly expressed the anxiety that Lyotard’s work produced when they

29. There has been, of course, a significant French reaction to Lyotard’s book as well. This is exemplified most recently by Élisabeth de Fontenay’s *Une tout autre histoire: Questions à Jean-François Lyotard* (Paris: Fayard, 2006). In general, the French reaction to the postmodern appropriation of the figure of the Jew has been more sensitive to its history. Shmuel Trigano, e.g., sees how the appropriation grew out of a reading by Levinas and the other thinkers of what he terms *l’école de pensée juive de Paris* (a term coined by Levinas that refers to the other participants of the early Colloque des intellectuels juifs de langue française as well). He calls it a “caricature” of Levinas’s and others’ thinking. See Shmuel Trigano, “Qu’est-ce que l’école juive de Paris? Le judaïsme d’après la Shoah face à l’histoire,” *Pardès: Revue européenne d’études et de culture juive* 23 (1997): 27–44.

30. See Michael Weingrad, “Jews (in Theory): Representations of Judaism, Anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust in Postmodern French Thought,” *Judaism* 45, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 82–84; Susan E. Shapiro, “Écriture judaïque: Where Are the Jews in Western Discourse?” in *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*, ed. Angelika Bammer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 135; and Debra Bergoffen, “Interrupting Lyotard: Wither the We?” in *Lyotard: Philosophy, Politics, and the Sublime*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (London: Routledge, 2002), 137.

wrote: "Although well intentioned, any such allegorization of the *Jew* is problematic in the extreme for the way that it deprives those who have historically grounded identities in those material signifiers of the power to speak for themselves and remain different."<sup>31</sup> Along with the book's other critics, the Boyarins thus argued that "real Jews" needed to speak for themselves and to take up the banner of a diasporic identity, which was finally being recognized as valuable and laudable.

In many ways, the reactions to Lyotard's book were more important than the book itself. Like Finkielkraut's response to the slogan "Nous sommes tous des juifs allemands," they expose the belief that there are only two options of identity expression available: one that is universalist and one that is particularist.<sup>32</sup> The Jew can either become an allegory and, thus, the object of a supersessionist move of some sort or vigilantly maintain the distinction of Jewish particularity by establishing a cipher that separates those who are authorized to speak for, about, or in the name of Jews from those who are not. This dichotomy excludes a third possibility that would function by drawing attention to the first two and the dangers inherent in taking up either position. This third possibility is, in fact, exactly what, because of its history, the trope of the Jew came to represent.

By tracing the history of the trope of the Jew in France leading up to Lyotard's restatement, I will reveal that what these critics refer to as *postmodern theory's Jew* or *écriture judaïque* arose, not because, as Susan Shapiro argues, Lyotard or any of his "postmodern" predecessors "forgot" the "historical construction of the Jew(s) in and by the West," but because they engaged with it critically.<sup>33</sup> It is my task to restore to the debates over the postmodern trope of the Jew its critical history, to reexamine in light of that history whether and how the position of the Jew could subsequently become one with which anyone, even a non-Jew, might come to identify. Only in this way can we discern the contemporary political significance of the revalorization of this figure.

In the following chapters, I consider the development of the trope of the Jew as a figure for the uprooted, following its development in the thought of a number of France's most influential postwar thinkers: Jean-Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot, and Jacques

31. Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, "Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (Summer 1993): 697.

32. The same assumption is operative in the recent championing of Pauline universalism (discussed in this work's conclusion), most evident in Alain Badiou's *Saint Paul: La fondation de l'universalisme* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1997), translated by Ray Brassier as *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

33. Shapiro, "Écriture judaïque," 191.

Derrida. My account traces a narrative between these thinkers, showing explicitly the influence of Sartre's account of Judaism on Levinas and of Levinas's account on Blanchot and Derrida.<sup>34</sup>

Maurice Barrès, whom I treat in the first chapter, acknowledges already in 1890 that the term *Jew* stands in for a series of associations: "*Juif* is only an adjective designating usurers, monopolizers, stockbrokers, all those that abuse money."<sup>35</sup> Yet he uses the term to differentiate, not between the roles of different people, but between their essences. Obviously, this type is an essentializing fabrication. For the figures I will discuss in the first three chapters, the function of this fiction is to provide a narrative that accounts for different modes of political identity. It reflects the marketplace of values in which it is produced and, thus, develops a currency of its own, a currency that can shift in value depending on the means of deployment. The political deployment of the term is meant, however, to mask its artificiality.

My purpose is to differentiate this *mythic* deployment of the idea of the Jew from a self-consciously *tropological* deployment. In the last two chapters, I argue that it is by redeploying the notion of the Jew in a self-consciously figurative manner that it gains its contemporary significance, that is to say, that it comes to function as a reminder of its own deception.

## Two Modes of Figuration: Myth versus Trope

I am using the term *myth* here in accordance with Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's formulation. Myth is, they suggest, "a fiction, in the strong, active sense of 'fashioning' . . . whose role is to propose . . . types in imitation of which an individual, or a city, or an entire people,

34. My criteria for determining which thinkers to include in this study differ significantly from those of other scholars dealing with the figure of the Jew in twentieth-century French thought. The primary concern of other scholars on this subject has been to lambaste the troping of the Jew in French postmodern texts as anti-Semitism masquerading as philo-Semitism. Consequently, some have included thinkers I do not consider here, while none have considered the significance of Emmanuel Levinas. What these scholars have missed both in their treatment of the subject and in their choice of thinkers is the self-conscious engagement by a number of postwar French thinkers with the history of anti-Semitism as it has been manifested in modern philosophy and in fin de siècle and early modern European political texts. See, e.g., Elizabeth Bellamy, *Affective Genealogies: Psychoanalysis, Postmodernism, and the "Jewish Question" After Auschwitz* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997); Boyarin and Boyarin, "Diaspora"; Jonathan Judaken, "Mapping 'the New Jewish Cultural Studies,'" *History Workshop Journal* 51 (Spring 2001): 269–77; Shapiro, "Écriture judaïque"; Weingrad, "Jews (in Theory)"; and Seth Wolitz, "Imagining the Jew in France: From 1945 to the Present," *Yale French Studies* 85 (1994): 119–34.

35. Maurice Barrès, "La formule antijuive," *Le figaro*, February 22, 1890.

can grasp themselves and identify themselves."<sup>36</sup> Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe construe myth as the dangerous mechanism whose conscious political deployment most clearly marks the movement from German romanticism to German totalitarianism. While myth might seem to be on the side of literature in a dichotomy that separates the literary from the philosophical, it is characterized, Nancy suggests, by the fact that it says nothing other than itself. Even as it participates in mimesis, it does not refer beyond itself but is, rather, as Nancy writes, borrowing a term from Schelling, *tautegorical*.<sup>37</sup> It represents a past for which the only reference is itself. In this sense, it is a form of incantation. It creates community by providing an origin narrative and installs the nexus for the political subject's identification with that community. Myth is, thus, the mechanism by which social fusion is created. It serves its function when it creates, as Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, write, "a total belief, an immediate, unre-served adhesion to the dreamed figure . . . it is both the model of identity and its present, effective *formed* reality."<sup>38</sup> For Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, myth represents the dangerous role that figuration serves when its function is reversed from imitation to formation, when formation produces, not re-presentation, but the model from which all copies must follow. As Lacoue-Labarthe writes: "The fascist haunting is, *de facto*, the haunting of figuration, of *Gestaltung*. It is a matter of simultaneously erecting a figure . . . and of producing, on the basis of this model, not a type of man, but the type of humanity—or an absolutely typical humanity."<sup>39</sup>

At the center of Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's account of myth is *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, Alfred Rosenberg's tract of Nazi propaganda that itself constructs the German people as the mythic people par excellence.<sup>40</sup> According to the logic of the Nazi myth, the Jew is defined as "the rejection of myth."<sup>41</sup> Consequently, to speak of the "mythic Jew" is, in these terms, an oxymoron. The Jew was constructed in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European philosophical and political discourse as a figure for deracination, for a disruption of the structure of belonging. This idea of the Jew is, in fact, a by-product of the construction of European

36. Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Le mythe Nazi* (Paris: L'aube, 1991), 34, translated by Brian Holmes as "The Nazi Myth," *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Winter 1990): 297.

37. Jean-Luc Nancy, *La communauté désœuvrée* (Paris: Christain Bourgois, 1986), 131, translated by Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney as *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 49.

38. Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, *Le mythe Nazi*, 56, and "The Nazi Myth," 306.

39. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "The Spirit of National Socialism and Its Destiny," in *Retreating the Political*, by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, ed. Simon Sparks (London: Routledge, 1997), 151.

40. See Alfred Rosenberg, *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* (Torrance: Noontide, 1982).

41. Lacoue-Labarthe, *La fiction du politique*, 138, and Heidegger, *Art and Politics*, 96.

nationalist myths. The Jews are, thus, the “antimythic” people par excellence. Does that make the idea of the Jew mythically antimythic? Insofar as the idea of the Jew becomes either a site for designating the position of the other or a site for self-recognition and identification, the answer is yes. In the first three chapters, I will expose the way in which this mythic antimyth is constructed. I will argue, however, in the following two chapters for the possibility that the construction of the Jew as antimythic generates the possibility of an alternative deployment of the figure of the Jew, one that self-consciously harnesses the political potential of figurative language.

In the history of Western philosophy, there is a long tradition, stemming from Plato’s critique of artistic representation, that treats figurative language as cognitively inferior to language that has a literal relation to its referent.<sup>42</sup> Figurative language, language that is defined by the fact that it is at a third remove from its proper referent, standing in for a word that is itself already a representation, is understood to be deceptive. As John Locke famously wrote: “All the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence has invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong *ideas*, move passions, and thereby mislead the judgment, and so indeed are a perfect cheat.”<sup>43</sup> A countertradition, most clearly articulated by Nietzsche, contends that *all* language is deceptive in its claim to represent reality. “Truths are illusions,” Nietzsche argues, “whose illusionary nature has been forgotten, metaphors that have been used up and have lost their imprint and that now operate as mere metal, no longer as coins.”<sup>44</sup>

Following Nietzsche, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy represent the operation of figuring as one that encompasses every operation of presentation and representation. It is, thus, tied acutely to the act of positing truth as something that can be presented as objective representation and is, thus, seen by them as an operation constitutive of the history of metaphysics.<sup>45</sup> Figuration would, thus, include, not only the language

42. The argument is made most famously, of course, in bks. 6 and 10 of the *Republic*. Certainly, it is a factor in much of Plato’s (and, thus, philosophy’s) general suspicion of rhetoric, evident also in the *Protagoras*, the *Gorgias*, and the *Phaedrus*. But, of course, this suspicion also reveals a certain dependence. As Paul Ricoeur writes: “Rhetoric is philosophy’s oldest enemy and its oldest ally” (*La métaphore vive* [Paris: Seuil, 1975], 14, translated by Robert Czerny as *The Rule of Metaphor* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975], 10).

43. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 508.

44. Friedrich Nietzsche, “Über Wahrheit und Lüge im Aussermoralischen Sinn,” in *Werke*, 15 vols. (Leipzig: C. G. Naumann, 1899–1905), 10:196, and “On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense,” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1959), 44.

45. See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, “Scene,” *Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse* 17 (1992): 73–98. I am indebted here to Simon Spark’s lucid introduction to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Retreating the Political*.

that is characteristically treated as figurative, but also, and more important, philosophical language that does not recognize its figural underpinnings. In his essay “Il faut,” Lacoue-Labarthe introduces the notion of *défigurisation*, which he defines as the “retreat” of the figure. *Défigurisation* for Lacoue-Labarthe is an operation characteristic of poetic or literary language—language that “crosses the figure out or exposes it in the negative,” that signals the failure of the figure to capture what it represents or marks the distinction between representation and the thing represented.<sup>46</sup> *Défigurisation* would, thus, mark the possibility of figural language calling attention to itself, calling itself into question as representation and truth source.

What differentiates such literary language from philosophical language is that, according to this Nietzschean model, philosophical language would be a language that, as Paul de Man puts it in “The Rhetoric of Tropes,” “forgets its untruth.”<sup>47</sup> As de Man asserts in his commentary on Nietzsche’s project, such a view opens up an avenue for rethinking the relation between philosophy and literature. The self-conscious insertion of literature into philosophy can bring philosophy to reflect on its own forgetting. Figural language, which presents itself as such through the forms of metonymy and metaphor, marks itself as a substitution for some proper referent. It signals a relation of both proximity to and distance from its object, declares itself both to be and not to be what it represents.<sup>48</sup> This function is already evident in the very notion of a trope, whose origin lies in the Greek *tropos*, meaning “a turn.” Poetic language, even as it would serve to represent an object, signals a turn away from that which is proper or fitting. Either as metaphor or as metonymy, the literary figure appears as a bastard, imposing itself as what does not appropriately belong.<sup>49</sup>

Although Lacoue-Labarthe does not speak directly to the political potential of “defigured” language, it is clear that poetic or literary language can serve a political purpose if it is harnessed as a mode of dis-

46. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “Il faut,” *Modern Language Notes* 107 (April 1992): 436.

47. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 111.

48. As Paul Ricoeur writes of the metaphorical *is*, it “at once signifies both ‘is not’ and ‘is like’” (Ricoeur, *La métaphore vive*, 11, and *The Rule of Metaphor*, 7).

49. In constructing this study, I have treated the notion of the trope interchangeably with that of the figure. In his *De institutione oratoria*, Quintilian (first century CE) acknowledges that *trope* and *figure* are often used interchangeably to refer to changes made in language for artful effect. However, he distinguishes between the two, designating the trope as a more particular kind of figurative language, as “an expression turned from its natural and principal signification to another, for the purpose of adorning style” (*The Institutio Oratoria*, 4 vols. [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921], 3:348–50 [bk. 9, chap. 1]).

course that interrupts myth. If, as Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe claim, the function of myth is to provide a means for a people to grasp themselves, to find themselves in an identity that fuses them together as a group, the enactment of *défigurisation* within the public sphere would do the exact opposite, as is evidenced by the chant of “Nous sommes tous des juifs allemands.” In this case, difference and separation are signaled rather than fusion. Not only does the literary figure here interrupt myth; it resists it by suggesting a new form of community utterance, one that mocks any mythic claim to fusion by expressing disjunction. It would, thus, be quintessentially the political mode opposed to totalitarian political expression.<sup>50</sup>

When the Jew is presented as a defigured literary figure, the significance of this operation is doubled, for to add explicit attention to the process of figuration adds another layer of deracination to the notion of the Jew. This, I contend, is exactly the function of the trope of the Jew insofar as it is self-consciously developed by Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida. Derrida in particular takes up the role of Judaism as figure. One of his larger aims is to further the Nietzschean project of troubling the distinction between literature and philosophy. He disputes claims to their clear distinction by exposing the way in which philosophy is itself a product of multiple literary effects, including metaphor and narrative voice, and by presenting his own thought in modes that are self-consciously literary.<sup>51</sup> Like Nietzsche, Derrida also exploits the capacity of literary language to disrupt thethetic act, to dislodge naive faith in the passage from sign to meaning or referent. His interest in the figure participates in both these moves. His concern with the notion of the figure is focused on the act of representation as such, on the way in which a particular entity—whether word, line, or symbol—can serve as an instantiation of a universal, and on the way in which the particularity of each representation, the language in which a word is spoken, the materiality of the symbol, disrupts its claim to universality. When one harnesses the ambivalence of language by calling attention to its turns, then the troubling particularity of representation becomes its literary

50. Nancy himself defines *literature* as the interruption of myth: “Literature interrupts itself: this is essentially what makes it literature (writing) and not myth. Or, better, what interrupts itself—discourse or song, gesture or voice, narrative or proof—that is literature (or writing). Precisely what interrupts or suspends its own *mythos*” (*La communauté desouvrée*, 179, and *The Inoperative Community*, 72). But Nancy is concerned not so much with the political function of figuration as with the way in which literature marks the separation between author and reader. Here, as will be made clear in the fourth chapter, he is clearly indebted to Blanchot.

51. See, e.g., Jacques Derrida, “La mythologie blanche,” in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), 247–324, translated by Alan Bass as “White Mythologies,” in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 207–71.

virtue. In an interview with Elisabeth Weber, Derrida remarks that, in thinking about Judaism, his own Judaism, he is always confronted with the problem of the figure, with a “*cas de figure*.” The figure of the Jew is for him not merely one trope among others but, rather, an exemplar of the function of figurality as such. Derrida speaks of the way in which Judaism has a double valence as “an absolutely singular trait not shared by all men and all women, but represents itself, as Judaism, as the figure of the human universal.”<sup>52</sup> When we consider the historical role that this figure of the Jew has played in French thought, then Derrida’s claim is further nuanced and complicated, for the Jew appears as a figure of deracination, of the impossibility of any person to claim the status of Judaism as his or her own. In titling this study *The Figural Jew*, I want to signal, not only the philosophical and literary implications of treating the Jew as a trope, but also the history of representation that has imbued Jewishness with its particular meaning.

## Overview

In the first chapter, I begin the book by recounting the historical origins of the post–World War II figure of the rootless Jew. While the exact origins of the association between Jews and rootlessness can be traced back to the story of Abraham or even further to the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, my concern in this chapter is primarily to show how post-1945 French representations are inflected by the emphases on roots, race, and uprootedness that circulated heavily around the turn of the twentieth century in France. I begin my story thus with three key figures in the Dreyfus affair: Maurice Barrès, Bernard Lazare, and Charles Péguy. What all three of these thinkers share despite their differing position during and following the affair is a sense of the defining status of race in political life. By considering their representations of Jews and Judaism in conjunction and contrast with one another, we can discover how and why in the postwar context Jewish rootlessness was ripe for revalorization.

The second chapter argues for Sartre’s significance in the history of the Jewish question in France. Although Sartre was clearly no expert on Judaism and wrote only occasionally on the topic, it is incontestable that his 1946 *Réflexions sur la question juive* had a profound impact on discourse about Jews and Jewish identity after the war. What emerges

52. Elisabeth Weber, *Questions au judaïsme* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1996), 75, translated by Rachel Bowlby as *Questioning Judaism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 40.

from this book is an account of the way in which the representation of Judaism in France is tied to the nation's struggle to determine political identity between the poles of universalism and particularism. The first part of the second chapter considers Sartre's investment in this debate and the role of the figure of the Jew in his treatment of the issue. It shows how the situation of the Jew comes to appear to Sartre as an intensification of the human situation and, thus, as a window into the stakes of existentialism. The second half of the chapter traces Sartre's engagement with Hegel and the role this played in his representation of Judaism. In particular, I argue that his late statements about Judaism recorded in *Hope Now*, the volume of interviews published by Benny Lévy soon after his death, can be explained and understood by means of his engagement with Hegelian philosophy of history.

The third chapter marks the turning point in the book. It considers Emmanuel Levinas's reconfiguration of the notion of deracination as a moral idea and the significance of this connection for his representation of Judaism. I show how Levinas expands the notion of uprooting so that it becomes one way of representing a moral subjectivity that is inaugurated in the response to the other who calls me to responsibility. His characterization of ethics as an uprooting of the self, I argue, not only facilitates the revalorization of Jewishness but also prepares the way for a theory of literary figuration as a function that uproots.

It is, thus, in the fourth chapter that, by considering Maurice Blanchot and Emmanuel Levinas in dialogue, a theory of the trope begins to emerge. I establish that Blanchot approaches Levinas's account both of ethics and of Judaism with a concern for the function of uprootedness in literature and politics. Despite Blanchot's consistent declarations of allegiance to Levinas and the rarity of his criticism of Levinas's philosophy, I argue that his conception of literature leads to a subtle critique of Levinas, one that results in radicalizing the notion of deracination and, thus, the figure of the Jew. Consequently, I argue, *being Jewish* comes to represent an exigency that calls into question allegiances of any sort.

In the final chapter, I show that it is in Jacques Derrida's own engagement with and ambivalent statements about his Jewish identity that we find both a theory and a practice of troping the Jew. This concern with the meaning of being Jewish follows from a set of concerns similar to Blanchot's, both in his treatment of literature and in his treatment of Judaism. With Derrida, however, the political implications of what it would mean to deploy the trope of the Jew politically are more fully developed. In this chapter, I examine Derrida's analysis of being Jewish from both the particularist and the universalist perspectives. Ultimately, I show that being

Jewish represents for Derrida an exemplary case of the very structure of exemplarity. This is the great asset and the great danger of its structure. The claim of being Jewish is the claim to exemplify the condition of uprootedness. Derrida uses the paradoxes inherent in this structure to argue that a just political and moral thinking can begin only with an aporia.

In tracing out the history of the postmodern trope of the Jew from its anti-Semitic origins to its tropological deployment in Blanchot and Derrida, I have three aims. The first is to offer a counternarrative to the one most often given to account for the philo-Semitism that marks post–World War II French thought. By reconstructing the history of the revalorization of the Jew, I am able to track its lineage back to the terms of French anti-Semitism and to reveal the process of resignification in the postwar era, showing how Sartre and Levinas mined the resources of anti-Semitism and exploited them in order to define an ideal that could be differentiated from both nostalgic nationalism and the rhetoric of universalizing humanism. What is generated in the process is a figural Jew, an archetype for a new kind of difference in particularity whose function is to suggest that there is a positive moral valence to resisting the discourse of belonging that dominates both the universalist and the particularist versions of political identity.

My second aim is to show that the portrait of the figural Jew must be self-critical if it is not, in fact, itself going to become a mythic antimyth and, thus, repeat the very dynamics of exclusivity and exemplarity that it would seem to oppose. As the postwar portrait of the deracinated Jew develops a moral valence, particularly in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, we must question how the status of deracination can *in fact* retain an association with the Jew without developing a mythic function. Once deracination is imbued with an ethical content, it must become a source for critiquing the structure of allegiance that is at the heart, not only of any nationalistic discourse, but of any communitarian identity as well. While the trope of the Jew presents a means of critiquing communitarianism, it also runs the risk of facilitating it—if it is deployed as a means to characterize the Jewish community.

It is at this point that the *figural* element in the postwar French portrait of the Jew becomes crucial. My third and final aim in this project is to illustrate the way in which Blanchot's theory about the nature of literary language, articulated at the same time that he is developing a figural representation of the Jew, might provide resources for ensuring that the revalorization of the figure of the Jew always entails a self-critical operation. Making this claim involves three steps. The first is to show that the image of the Jew that is generated by post–World War II French thought

is, in fact, a trope, that it is a metaphoric figure and, thus, functions as a literary representation with aspirations that distinguish it from the philosophical concept. The second step is to develop from Blanchot's and Derrida's writings a theory of the trope, or the literary "turn," that can be applied to figural representations of the Jew. The third step is to show how this literary operation can be deployed politically, as a demythologizing force, in the terms of Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe.

It is with these considerations in mind that I return to the case of May '68. Was the students' identification with German Jews a blatant usurpation of the position of the victim that postwar Jews in Europe had been held to occupy? Or does an analysis of the figural Jew allow us to read such moments of identification differently? Might we read them as moments in which the ambivalence of metaphor is enacted, where the act of identification is thwarted by the impossibility of its expression, as acts of protest that express resistance to pledges of allegiance, through the performance of a claim to allegiance that fails by virtue of its own structure? What is the potential, finally, for this type of performance to serve as an effective mode of political action in our contemporary world?

### Political Implications

Although I do not work out a program or a system delineating how a performance of critical identification/disidentification might function in the face of our present-day ethnic and political conflicts, I have no doubt of the relevance of such an operation to current debates both in France and in the United States over multiculturalism and the politics of identity. Both Charles Taylor and Alain Finkielkraut have argued that the call for recognition that characterizes the debates over multiculturalism has its roots in Herder's theory that each *Volk* has a unique and distinct means of expressing its humanity.<sup>53</sup> It is questionable whether one can, in fact, prove Herder as a point of origin.<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, it is fair

53. See Alain Finkielkraut, *La défaite de la pensée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), translated by Judith Friedlander as *The Defeat of the Mind* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); and Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 30.

54. Robert Bernasconi rightly argues that Taylor and Finkielkraut are mistaken in locating the origins of multiculturalism in romanticism, given that the movement arises as a response to European hegemony. I would go a step further and argue that such claims seem to repeat the very logic that multiculturalism protests by locating Europe as the center and source and, thus, identifying "heretical" cultural forms as copies or perversions of Western movements. See Robert Bernasconi, "'Stuck inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again': Interculturalism and the Conversion of Races," in *Theorizing Multiculturalism: A Guide to the Current Debate*, ed. Cynthia Willett (London: Blackwell, 1998), 282.

to say that the logic underpinning the multiculturalist position shares with Herder a suspicion of Enlightenment claims to unbiased universalism, validating instead the distinctiveness of cultures, and endorsing allegiance to one's culture, one's roots, one's shared past.<sup>55</sup>

Any comparison of debates over multiculturalism in France and the United States reveals that the links between multiculturalism and German romanticism have different historical resonances for each culture. The resistance to multiculturalism often associated with France has come to the world's attention with the debate over the Islamic head scarf (*hijab*) and the 2004 law prohibiting clothing or large symbols of religious affiliation in public schools. This resistance is often attributed to the strength of the republican tradition in France, to its adherence to a brand of universalism that resists difference in the name of equality.<sup>56</sup> Part of the resistance to "communitarianism," however, derives from the associations so easily drawn in France among political particularism, rootedness, and fascism. Finkelkraut makes this connection explicit in *The Defeat of the Mind* (*La défaite de la pensée*) and uses it to justify his own adherence to the classic republican model. His lament is, indeed, where have all the Dreyfusards gone?<sup>57</sup>

Certainly, Finkelkraut is not alone among postwar French philosophers in his concern over the return of tribalism or communitarianism in postmodernity.<sup>58</sup> Most notably, this position is evident in Alain Badiou's recent championing of Pauline universalism. His attack is against the proliferation of identities and the accompanying relativism,<sup>59</sup> which he associates with a fetishization of maintaining a "right to difference."<sup>60</sup> Like Finkelkraut, Badiou finds the warriors of difference on both the Right and the Left, among Jean-Marie Le Pen supporters and those fighting

55. See "Yet Another Philosophy of History," in which all the positions outlined above are clearly articulated. One might read this essay as predicting the movement of multiculturalism as an antidote to the consequences of Enlightenment rationalism: "Our age will soon open more eyes: before very long we will be impelled to seek spiritual springs to quench the thirst of the desert—we will learn to value the epochs we now despise—the sentiment of general humanity and happiness will be stimulated. . . . History of the world! The smallest empire and the largest, the smallest bird's nest, contribute to it" (J. G. Herder, *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* [Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1967], 114, extract translated as "Yet Another Philosophy of History," in *J. G. Herder on Social and Political Culture*, ed. F. M. Barnard [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969], 218).

56. See John R. Bowen, *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves: Islam, the State and Public Space* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); and Jennings, "Citizenship, Republicanism and Multiculturalism."

57. The first subheading in Finkelkraut's chapter on multiculturalism in *The Defeat of the Mind* is "The Disappearance of the Dreyfusards."

58. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1992), xxii.

59. Badiou, *Saint Paul* (French), 12, and *Saint Paul* (English), 12.

60. Alain Badiou, *L'éthique: Essai sur la conscience du mal* (Paris: Hatier, 1993), 21, translated by Peter Hallward as *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2002), 20.

for minority recognition.<sup>61</sup> For Badiou, the target is explicitly the cult of difference that he associates with Levinasian ethics. Although he admits that those who politicize the other in the name of minority identity mis-read Levinas, it is nonetheless against Levinas that he champions Paul as the patriarch of universalism and a potential guide to us in our present moment. Paul, according to Badiou, preaches a universalism “indifferent to differences” and, thus, offers us a way out of the morass of identity politics.<sup>62</sup> Badiou’s argument against Levinas is that the challenge of ethics is not to recognize difference, which confronts us everywhere and is undeniable, but rather to look past that difference in the name of a truth that can unite people in such a way that difference becomes irrelevant. The resonance is clear: Badiou is aligned with Paul and Levinas with the recalcitrant Jews in the epistles who hold tight to the law in the name of asserting and maintaining particularity. Badiou thus reproduces one of the age-old tropes of the Jew—as stubbornly attached to the dead letter. Once again, what we see in Badiou’s position is the maintenance of a simple dichotomy that opposes particularism to universalism. Although Badiou would not align himself with Finkelkraut, he too is attempting to return to the rhetoric of universalism, a militant Marxist universalism rather than a Dreyfusard republicanism. What he fails to see in his work on Paul and his more explicit attack on contemporary Judaism in *Circonstances*, 3 is that Levinas himself offers us the resources for overcoming identity politics.<sup>63</sup> It is, in fact, through Levinas’s representation of the Jew that he does so. Levinas and a strand of his readers and commentators share with Badiou the concern to avoid a return to tribalism, yet they are equally suspicious of any facile return to universalism.

What we find in Derrida and Blanchot, as readers of Levinas, is the beginning of a new mode of thinking about political identity, one that commences from a critique of the very notion of belonging, one that suggests, not only that identity can be thought of as a performance, but also that the power of the performance might, in fact, be its failure. Such failures might help expose the ways in which the structures of belonging that seem so intrinsic to political thought are at the heart of what leads both a pure universalist republicanism and a politics of identity into exclusionary and discriminatory practices.

The United States is not immune from such problems, even if lacking in the historical associations between romantic valorizations of the

61. Badiou, *Saint Paul* (French), 9–10, and *Saint Paul* (English), 9–10.

62. Badiou, *L’éthique*, 27, and *Ethics*, 27.

63. Alain Badiou, *Circonstances*, 3: *Portées du mot “juif”* (Paris: Lignes, 2005). This work is treated at some length in my conclusion.

*Volksgeist* and the very racism that multiculturalism seems aimed at combating. Americans remain fascinated by and enamored of our roots, even as they tend to remind us of our distance from ancestral origins. Perhaps nothing illustrates this fascination more clearly than the recent spate of companies offering genetic analysis in order to determine “ancestral pedigrees.”<sup>64</sup> In the belief that one can overcome the indeterminacy of the self by discovering one’s genetic roots, we find ourselves again operating under the assumption that one’s blood reveals one’s essence. Yet this process of “self-discovery” is not treated in this country as the least bit politically or philosophically problematic. Nonetheless, we are beginning to reflect critically on the problems involved in a politics of identity. Increasingly, we are searching out ways to articulate difference without reifying race and gender identities.<sup>65</sup>

In the close of her essay “Wounded Attachments,” Wendy Brown criticizes the modern tendency to reformulate “our historical exclusion as a matter of historically produced and politically rich *alterity*.” This reappropriation of injury, she convincingly argues, follows from a reliance on resentment as a means of asserting power and leads to a guarding of suffering. One way out of the morass of identity politics, she suggests, is to begin rethinking political expression, “the language of ‘I am’—with its defensive closure on identity, its insistence on the fixity of position, its equation of social with moral positioning.” Her formulation of identity politics recalls the category of myth as it is formulated by Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe and reminds us that this mode of political discourse can appear on both sides of the political spectrum. Brown proposes replacing this form of discourse with futural modes of expression focusing on desires, such as “wanting to be” or “wanting to have.” Such formulations, she suggests, would “destabilize the formulation of identity as fixed position, as entrenchment by history.”<sup>66</sup>

While I sympathize with Brown’s aim to remove from political expression the need to protect attachments, particularly the attachment to certain wrongs as the defining cause of political identities, I would like

64. See Amy Harmon, “Seeking Ancestry in DNA Ties Uncovered by Tests,” *New York Times*, April 16, 2006; and Steven Pinker, “Strangled by Roots: The Genealogy Craze in America,” *New Republic*, August 6, 2007, 32–35.

65. For a summary of various liberal positions against identity politics and a defense of identity-based politics in the face of these critiques, see Courtney Jung, “Why Liberals Should Value Identity Politics,” *Daedalus* 135, no. 4 (Fall 2006): 32–39. See also Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); and Nancy Fraser, “From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a ‘Post-Socialist’ Age,” in *Theorizing Multiculturalism*, ed. Cynthia Willett (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 19–50.

66. Wendy Brown, *States of Injury* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 75.

to suggest that one must go further than saying “I want” rather than “I have” in order to disrupt the mythic operation of identity construction. We must ask first whether desires that focus on acquisition and ontology can, in fact, themselves be consistent with a moral positioning. To orient oneself toward a true futurity would, as both Derrida and Levinas have argued, require the renunciation of the assertion that such goals rightly *belong* to you.<sup>67</sup> This leaves political speech, however, in a conundrum. To renounce our political goals as our own would seem to amount to extreme quietism, to a final rejection of the political sphere. How can we cultivate activism without reasserting a politics of identity?

In sympathy with Brown, but in the hopes of further disarming the politics of identity, I propose that it is by way of figural modes of expression introducing comparison, performance, and irony into political speech that we can begin to destabilize the politics of identity without resorting to the nostalgia of a universalizing humanism. We can acknowledge the wrongs committed in the political sphere without returning to a politics of ethnic essentialism where morality is built on the morally pristine position of victimhood.

The history of the production of the trope of the Jew tells one story of how a proper label for an identity can become detached from its proper meaning and introduce performance back into politics. The very fact that we cannot help but identify something offensive in the reappropriation of certain political identities—in the declaration, for example, that the Palestinians are “the new Jews”—is part of the political power of the trope.

When Edward Said made his pronouncement in 2000 that he was “the last Jewish Intellectual,” he no doubt perceived his own statement as provocative. He was himself, whether he knew it or not, repeating Jacques Derrida’s claim in “Circumfession” (1993) that he was “the last of the Jews.”<sup>68</sup> In his reference to Adorno, Said clearly means to use the term *Jew* as a metonym for *exile* in order to call attention to the irony that he himself had been uprooted by Jews. Nonetheless, the ironic function of

67. The idea that a true messianicity undoes any claims to possession is present throughout Derrida’s later corpus. See, in particular, Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), translated by Peggy Kamuf as *Specters of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994), *Mal d’archive* (Paris: Galilée, 1995), translated by Eric Prenowitz as *Archive Fever* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), *Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Galilée, 1997), translated by Pascale-Anne Brault as *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), and *Schibboleth pour Paul Celan* (Paris: Galilée, 1986), translated as “Schibboleth for Paul Celan,” in Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

68. Jacques Derrida, “Circumfession,” in *Jacques Derrida*, by Geoffrey Bennington (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 178, translated as “Circumfession,” in *Jacques Derrida*, by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 190.

the statement depends on the way in which he himself, through his identification with the Jews, is acting as an occupier, by usurping the “rightful” position of “real” Jews such as Amos Oz. It is exactly the political impact of such a statement of identification, in the way that it manages to valorize rootlessness and simultaneously to indicate the impossibility of staying true to this idea, that this book seeks to explore.