



# Jewishness and postcoloniality in Borges and Derrida: the singular and the specific

Edmund Chapman

**To cite this article:** Edmund Chapman (2022) Jewishness and postcoloniality in Borges and Derrida: the singular and the specific, *Textual Practice*, 36:8, 1226-1243, DOI: [10.1080/0950236X.2021.1900371](https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1900371)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1900371>



Published online: 16 Mar 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 130




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



# Jewishness and postcoloniality in Borges and Derrida: the singular and the specific

Edmund Chapman 

The University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

## ABSTRACT

This paper reads two texts, ‘The Argentine Writer and Tradition’ by Jorge Luis Borges and *Monolingualism of the Other* by Jacques Derrida, to examine the tension between singularity and specificity in comparative work, particularly in comparisons between Jewishness and postcoloniality. ‘Singularity’ is understood here as uniqueness, while ‘specificity’ is the factors that define that uniqueness. Borges’ text serves as an example of the potential pitfalls of comparative work that is inconsistent in its recognition of singularity and specificity. Borges affords Jewish writers singularity, but not specificity, and so ends up denying the very elements of Jewish culture his argument appears to valorise, at the expense of his celebration of the postcolonial condition. Borges’ comparison therefore undermines its own logic. Derrida, meanwhile, appears to exaggerate one particular colonised Jewish community’s exceptionalism, but through this apparent focus on the specificity of one group at the expense of others, offers a potential model for how to work comparatively yet still recognise the specificity of multiple groups.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 19 May 2020; Accepted 5 November 2020

**KEYWORDS** Jorge Luis Borges; Jacques Derrida; postcolonial theory; Jewish Studies; comparative criticism; specificity

## Introduction

Perhaps to an even greater extent than other comparative critical fields, Postcolonial Studies is characterised by a tension between the general and the particular. The discipline is, arguably by definition, riven with anxieties about whether it is appropriate to treat, say, mid-19th-century India and contemporary Ghana under the same label.<sup>1</sup> As Peter Hallward puts it, quoting Sangeeta Ray, ‘by preserving the lexical singularity of *the* postcolonial, while so often insisting that “the heterogeneity [of the postcolonial] must regularly and arduously be affirmed”, postcolonial critics have devised an almost purely self-generating debate’.<sup>2</sup> While the very existence of the field of postcolonial criticism highlights the importance of

**CONTACT** Edmund Chapman  [Edmund.chapman@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:Edmund.chapman@manchester.ac.uk)

© 2021 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

comparativism, such criticism must also be intimately concerned with the particularities of individual instances of colonialism if it is not to treat 'colonialism' as an ahistorical, pan-global category. Such an abstraction of difference is not only a philosophical concern. Since the field's central concern is colonialism and its legacies, postcolonial scholarship is essentially a study of systems of domination and oppression. Any postcolonial criticism not attentive to the precise conditions of an individual instance of colonialism, then, does not merely lack nuance: it potentially betrays the need to understand and recognise that what is being described and conceptualised is the actual suffering of real people.

The question arises, however, how to recognise particularity. Hallward's *Absolutely Postcolonial* diagnoses in postcolonial criticism a misapprehension of the relationship between 'singularity' and 'specificity'. Philosophically rigorous as Hallward is, by focusing solely on postcolonial theory, his criticism arguably does not go far enough. The tension between the recognition of particularity, and describing this particularity in terms that do not render it merely a manifestation of an abstract 'otherness', is at the heart of any form of comparative criticism or theory. In comparative work, while negotiating the individual example and its application to other contexts, questions of exemplarity arise: whether, or how, an example is comparable to other examples; whether, by its nature as an example, it becomes *primus inter pares*, exceptional; or whether, through comparison, an example must then lose the very conditions that made it exemplary.<sup>3</sup> There is also a potential ethical element when the objects of comparison are groups of people or their cultural products. Affirming uniqueness without describing adequately the factors that contribute to that uniqueness risks homogenising or reifying the very people or artworks being positioned as 'different'. The potential arises for a people to be marked as 'other' without a recognition of the actual conditions that make them so, reducing them to a generic 'otherness' that frames them as merely a yardstick against which others will be judged to be normative or not – without assigning the 'different' group any identity in and of themselves. Moreover, comparative work can risk positing a group as merely illustrative of a principle that is most fully, or 'authentically', enacted elsewhere – thus disavowing that group of having importance in their own right, aside from any other issues a notion of 'authenticity' raises.

The aim of this essay is to examine some of the ways in which comparison can negotiate, or fail to negotiate, the tensions described above. It asks whether comparative criticism can recognise those qualities that render a group unique, without reducing them to a marker of an essentialised 'otherness' – while simultaneously recognising the commonalities that make comparison possible in the first place, without homogenisation into a vague 'universality'. For the purposes of this essay – diverging from Hallward's admittedly 'somewhat idiosyncratic' definitions of 'singular' and 'specific' –

‘singularity’ can be understood as uniqueness: positing that a person, community or text is exceptional in some way, and worthy of special attention.<sup>4</sup> ‘Specificity’ can be understood as recognising precisely *why* something has been marked as unique – a recognition of the particular conditions that contribute to that uniqueness.

The tension between singularity and specificity is discussed here in relation to two texts comparing Jewish and (post-)colonial experiences. Notwithstanding postcolonial theory’s own issues with singularity and specificity, bringing such thought together with consideration of Jewish histories or texts prompts further questions.<sup>5</sup> Such work can illuminate both Jewish Studies and Postcolonial Studies, allowing for the recognition of kinships in both histories of oppression or discrimination, and imaginative ‘diasporic’ liberation.<sup>6</sup> The question of recognising specificity, however, remains central, if either Jewish or postcolonial subjects are not to become mere allegories of ‘singular’ difference for each other. Yet the solution cannot simply be ever more precise focus on unique characteristics. ‘Mere insistence on particularity’, as Hallward characteristically forthrightly says, ‘cannot resolve any *theoretical* question whatsoever.’<sup>7</sup> For Hallward this is firstly because every context possesses ‘endless divisibility’ – one can always be more particular – and because of the ease with which such thinking can slip into criteria of ‘authenticity’, where only the endlessly particular subject is able to testify about ‘their’ experience.<sup>8</sup> As Jane Hiddleston puts it, ‘Any attention to the singularity of the marginalised subject should not newly harden and freeze that singularity by according it a false “identity.”’<sup>9</sup> An over-insistence on particularity also denies the very possibility of comparative work, and, counter-intuitively, risks abstracting the specific into the merely singular – an abstract ‘difference’.

The two examples discussed here that illustrate the tension between singularity and specificity, and the ways in which comparison between Jewish and postcolonial subjects can be productive or problematic, are Jorge Luis Borges’ ‘El Escritor Argentino y la Tradición’ and Jacques Derrida’s *Le Monolinguisme de l’Autre*. Both writers repeatedly engaged with themes of ‘postcoloniality’ and ‘Jewishness’ to an extent to which it would be impossible to do justice in an essay of this length.<sup>10</sup> The individual texts discussed here are by no means presented as if they are ‘representative’ of these writers’ work, much less representative of criticism that brings together Jewish Studies and postcolonial theory. However, these two texts are notable as they not only *compare* Jewish and postcolonial experience, but also seemingly generalise one group for the sake of recognising the particular conditions of another – therefore affording mere singularity to one group, and specificity to another.

Borges presents ‘Jewish writers’, in general, as illustrating the condition of a specific group of postcolonial artists, Argentinian writers, while Derrida

describes an individual Jewish community – the Algerian Jewish community in which he grew up in the 1940s – as representative of the general condition of the colonised. However, the *way in which* these groups are compared is key. Borges seems to present Jewish writers as a model for the rest of the literary world, but the structure of his argument renders Jews merely singular, unique, without assigning specificity, any conditions that justify the designation of uniqueness. Derrida, meanwhile, appears to generalise and exaggerate one particular Jewish community's exceptionality, and yet through such a movement, allows for a potential model of comparative work.

As Erin Graff Zivin notes, despite the fact that Borges' and Derrida's writings have been compared in many essays, such a comparison is "impossible" – not because we cannot compare them, but because both writers repeatedly problematise the logic that would posit a single author-figure who could then be 'compared' to another. Paradoxically, any attempt to compare the two is therefore 'doomed [...] to succeed' as there are 'always enough precursors [...] to go around' – always another Derrida or another Borges; one *could* always find what one is looking for.<sup>11</sup> Yet to evaluate Borges' playful advice to fellow authors in 'El Escritor Argentino' on the same terms as Derrida's more 'philosophical' text would be to enact the very problematic this essay describes, comparing while ignoring specificity. Given that this essay is itself an act of comparison, it seeks to find commonalities between Borges' and Derrida's work, while also not evaluating them according to the same logic; it attempts to recognise specificity, paying attention to the particular terms of each text's argument. Reading each text on its own terms, it is nevertheless possible to read them together to attempt to practise the very thing they both seek to perform: working comparatively, yet recognising specificity.

### ***Borges' irreverent Jewishness***

Ilan Stavans diagnoses in Borges a 'relentless desire [...] to claim, as part of his self, a Jewishness he found in books, in idols such as Baruch Spinoza, in an overall attitude, at once reverential and subversive, toward God, life, and the intellect. [...] he simply imagined himself a Jew'.<sup>12</sup> Borges' understanding of 'Jewishness' pertaining to a simultaneously 'reverential and subversive' attitude is certainly apparent in 'El Escritor Argentino y la Tradición', originally delivered as a lecture in 1951, which is also one of Borges' most explicit discussions of 'postcolonial' themes. Borges sees Jewish writers' 'subversive' nature as a model for postcolonial writers. However, 'El Escritor Argentino' also highlights a criticism that could be levelled at Borges more generally: that, fascinated as he no doubt was by Jewish texts and 'Jewishness', 'actual Jews are unnecessary in the presence of Borges's literary affinity with Judaism'.<sup>13</sup>

Borges' ultimate aim in 'El Escritor Argentino' is to suggest what the foundation of an Argentinian national literature might be.<sup>14</sup> Although 'El Escritor Argentino' is therefore entirely concerned with the tension between the local and the global, and the role of the singular or specific within a wider world, the lecture does not extensively compare different groups. As in many of Borges' texts, the lecture is littered with allusions, quotations (accurate and otherwise) and comparisons that illustrate Borges' wider argument. To suggest that Borges' comparison is not detailed enough would therefore be to disregard the specificity of Borges' writing. Instead, the argument here is that *within the terms set out in Borges' lecture*, the comparison of Jewish and postcolonial experiences disproves the very argument the lecture itself tries to make – because of its elision of singularity and specificity. It is not that Borges is 'not specific enough', but that Borges' lecture does not maintain its own standards of specificity.

Borges concludes that the Argentinian literary tradition is 'the whole of Western culture [...] we have a right to this tradition, a greater right than that which the inhabitants of one Western nation or another may have'.<sup>15</sup> Because Argentinians have a claim to 'European subjects', but are not themselves part of Europe, they can, says Borges, handle European traditions 'with an irreverence that can have, and already has had, fortunate consequences'.<sup>16</sup> It is this 'irreverence' that furthers a uniquely Argentinian, postcolonial literary tradition. Borges notes a similar 'irreverence' in two other groups of writers. He cites an essay by the US sociologist Thorstein Veblen, which speculates that 'Jews are prominent in Western culture' because 'they act within that culture and at the same time do not feel bound to it by any special devotion'. Therefore, Borges summarises, 'it will always be easier for a Jew than for a non-Jew to make innovations in Western culture'. He continues that a similar capacity is true of 'the Irish in English culture', and of 'Argentines, and South Americans in general'.<sup>17</sup> Borges therefore unites Jewish, Irish and South American writers as figures who are both marginal to, and central innovators of, the 'western tradition'.

Graff Zivin sees Borges' lecture as representative of a trend in 'Latin American letters' where 'the "Jew" [...] codif[ies] the position of the Latin American intellectual himself or herself [...] within the unequal cultural terrain of the West'.<sup>18</sup> Borges' interest here is not the individual achievements of Jewish or Irish writers but their sense of difference, their 'Jewishness' or 'Irishness', and how this might be compared to, or illustrate, *argentinidad*. It is difference, above all, that Borges is fascinated with, as this is what affords the 'irreverence' that allows for innovation.<sup>19</sup> It may appear then that Borges assigns singularity, uniqueness, but not specificity, particular reasons for that uniqueness, to his example groups, as he valorises abstract 'difference'.

However, it is not even clear whether, in Borges' terms, Jewish writers are as 'different' as he claims. The majority of the lecture describes examples from Argentinian literature in relation to the 'western tradition'. Argentinian writers are therefore positioned as different *from* something else in their relationship with Europe. Similarly, Borges notes that given how 'many of [the] illustrious Irishmen' he describes 'were the descendants of Englishmen, men with no Celtic blood', it is simply 'feeling themselves to be Irish, to be different' that is 'enough to enable them to make innovations in English culture'.<sup>20</sup> It is the particular position of 'Irishness' in relation to 'Englishness', or *argentinidad* in relation to Europe, that gives these two groups of postcolonial writers singularity: their identities are defined in their difference from other identities.

The same is not true of the 'Jews in Western culture'. While the Jewish artists of Borges' example may 'feel different', unlike the Argentinian or Irish writers, they have no geographical difference from other Europeans – nor, crucially, does Borges mention any particular cultural difference. European Jews are Europeans. While they may also be Jews, it is unclear how or why, in Borges' terms, this separates them from the rest of 'Western culture', other than an undefined sense of 'feel[ing] different'. The Jews of Borges' description may well 'not feel bound to [Western culture] by any special devotion' – but the same is true, as Borges explicitly says, for Irish and Argentinian writers, because of their geographical or cultural difference *from* elements of 'Western culture'. While they are asserted to be singular, unique, Borges does not set up a comparison that shows what Jews are different *from*, in the way that Irish writers for example are different from 'English' culture. It is therefore not clear why Jews should be considered singular – unique – let alone specific – afforded uniqueness by a particular set of unique attributes.

Borges stands here in contrast to the Veblen essay he references, which speculates that an essential element in Jewish 'pre-eminence' is precisely Jews' difference from 'non-Jews':

It appears to be only when the gifted Jew escapes from the cultural environment created and fed by the particular genius of his own people, only when he [...] becomes a naturalized, though hyphenate, citizen in the gentile republic of learning, that he comes into his own as a creative leader in the world's intellectual enterprise. It is [...] by force of a divided allegiance to the people of his origin, that he finds himself in the vanguard of modern inquiry.<sup>21</sup>

Essentialist as Veblen may be, he does at least name, even if in passing, what Jews are different from: he sets up a distinction between the Jewish 'cultural environment' and the 'gentile republic of learning'. This means that, albeit crudely, Veblen assigns the Jews he describes singularity – it is clear that they are different from another group.

Yet given that Veblen is no more sensitive to the experience of actual Jews than ‘El Escritor Argentino’, relational identity alone is clearly no guarantor of acknowledgement of a group’s own *specific* identity. In fact, as Yitzhak Lewis points out, Borges himself is virtually explicit on this point. In rejecting an abundance of local colour as the basis of Argentinian literature, Borges ironically notes that ‘the Argentine cult of local color [*sic*] is a recent European cult that nationalists should reject as a foreign import’.<sup>22</sup> Given that Argentinian literature is necessarily in dialogue with European literature, Lewis writes, ‘whatever it is that will make the Argentine “local” will not make him local *to* Argentina [...] as much as it will differentiate him *from* Europe’.<sup>23</sup> Relational identity can reify the group in question as merely ‘singular’ – an example of an abstract notion of ‘difference’ without recognition of the unique characteristics of that difference on their own terms. While it would be reductionist to describe Hallward’s insistence of the importance of ‘relational’ identity as a version of what is described above, the point remains that relation alone is not enough to recognise specificity – noting the unique factors that contribute to ‘difference’.

To return to Borges’ lecture, he *does* recognise the unique types of uniqueness that give postcolonial writers specificity – but again, does not do the same for Jewish writers. This is achieved through the ‘literary traditions’ Borges describes. The ultimate aim of Borges’ lecture is to suggest that reworking elements of the European tradition within an Argentinian context sustains a new Argentinian tradition: ‘everything we Argentine writers do felicitously will belong to the Argentine tradition’.<sup>24</sup> The Argentinian writer’s ‘difference’ both gives them a ‘right’ to the western tradition and allows them to develop a uniquely Argentinian tradition which will be, crucially, *specific* in its *argentinidad*. The recommendation of such a tradition is the entire reason for Borges’ argument; Irish and Jewish writers are only mentioned at all as they apparently provide a model to follow.

Unlike Argentinian writers, Irish writers do not create a new national literature: rather, they ‘make innovations in English culture’.<sup>25</sup> Yet Borges does not subsume Irish writers entirely into the English tradition, or deny Irish writers a position *as* Irish writers. Borges names ‘Shaw, Berkley, Swift’, suggesting (Anglo-)Irish writers form a diasporic genealogy, a ‘tradition within the tradition’. As with the proposed Argentinian tradition, Borges recognises the specific condition of Irish writers. He is not merely attentive to the different relationships various groups of postcolonial writers have with the so-called western tradition and its subsidiaries: the particular character of these relationships is the point. Just as what makes the Argentinian tradition ‘Argentinian’ is the focus of Borges’ argument, he notes what is ‘Irish’ about the ‘Irish tradition’.

However, Borges makes no mention of a distinct ‘Jewish tradition’ within which innovation might be possible, or elements of which might innovatively



be brought into 'Western culture'. For the European Jewish writer, in contrast to Argentinians but similarly to (Anglo-)Irish writers, innovation happens entirely within the dominant tradition: 'Jews are prominent in Western culture'. Jewish writers are therefore *part of* the Western tradition. Borges does not name any Jewish writers as examples here, which is notable given how frequently he cites other writers. Unlike Irish writers, Jewish writers are not afforded any genealogy or tradition of their own.<sup>26</sup> It would appear that European Jews, in Borges' logic, are entirely 'Western'. It is not in itself problematic to understand European Jewish writers as simply part of the 'Western tradition'; doing so goes against the antisemitic assumption that Jews are only ever, first and foremost, Jews. However, the implicit denial of a 'Jewish tradition' in Borges' lecture is difficult to square with the fact that he also asserts that Jewish writers are not 'fully' part of the Western tradition. After all, Jews are only mentioned by Borges at all because they are singular, marked apart from the rest of Western literature. However, if there is no distinct 'Jewish tradition' that Jewish writers create in the way that Borges suggests Argentinian or Irish writers can, and Jewish writers are part of what is 'Western', there is no clear reason why Jews should be marked as different *in terms of a literary tradition* – which is the entire reason for Borges' comparison.

In Borges' lecture, then, Jews are asserted to inhabit a *singular* position similar to postcolonial subjects, but are not afforded the *specificity* recognised in postcolonial writers. The reason this is problematic is not because Borges denies Jewish experience, or because he pits a multi-faceted postcolonial world against a homogenous 'Western tradition' that denies Europe's 'internal others'.<sup>27</sup> Rather, it is that to make a point about the way in which Argentinian postcolonial literature is related to the 'Western tradition', Borges uses Jewish writers as an example to follow. However, since Jewish writers are not assigned specific differences, there is no apparent reason why they should be singled out – thus meaning Borges' comparison fails on its own terms. Postcolonial difference in 'El Escritor Argentino' is specific and productive, allowing new traditions to be created; Jewish difference is singular and generic, simply a standard of 'difference' against which to measure other types of difference.

None of this is to accuse Borges of antisemitism. Indeed, Borges' sensitivity to linkages between Jewishness and postcoloniality was unusual for a writer in 1950s Argentina, and he was critical of those who would overlook this kinship.<sup>28</sup> However, in 'El Escritor Argentino', the way in which Borges draws comparisons between different kinds of 'otherness' shows how comparison can elide specificity even as it apparently celebrates it. Borges reduces Jews to simply a trope, an allegory of a generalised 'otherness' precisely *by* making them a point of comparison to Argentinian writers. By not affording specificity to Jewish writers, Borges does not make clear why

they are a model for Argentinians to follow. This effectively effaces Jews and Jewishness in Borges' lecture, but the broader issue highlighted is that comparison that is not consistent in its recognition of singularity and specificity risks undoing the logic of the comparison itself, let alone any wider point that might be made via such an act of comparison. As we have seen, the aim of Borges' essay is not a comprehensive comparison of Argentinian writers and Jewish writers; the issue is not that Borges is not equally detailed in his discussion of Argentinian and Jewish writers. It is that without specificity, the very logic of comparison apparently begins to become untenable.

### ***Derrida's colonised Jewishness***

Thinking through Borges' comparisons shows the difficulties in attempting to describe different situations under one logic. Comparison between Jewish and postcolonial subjects can be grounds for the denial of specificity, as well as the recognition of commonalities of suffering or innovation. However, as we have seen, following Hallward, the solution is not simply 'more specificity'. An unending focus on specificity above all else both makes comparison itself impossible, and paradoxically risks denying specificity by seemingly making the threshold for recognition of 'true specificity' infinitely regress.

Apparently similarly to Borges, Derrida's *Le Monolinguisme de l'Autre* also seems to focus on one kind of specificity at the expense of another. Here, Derrida draws on his own biography to make coloniality and Jewishness inextricable, or even representative of each other. The North African Jew is the exemplary colonised subject, experiencing a double alienation both as a Jew and as a colonised subject – in stark contrast to Borges, who sees the Jewish writer as exemplary of the freedom and 'irreverence' enjoyed by the postcolonial writer. Derrida's text appears to perform the opposite operation to Borges' lecture, stereotyping a *singular* 'postcolonial' experience that serves to illuminate one *specific* Jewish community's experience. However, the broad strokes with which Derrida's text paints are precisely the point of his argument: both the substance and method of Derrida's argument challenge the relationship between the singular and the specific.<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, Derrida's text provides a potential future direction for comparative study. This is not to judge Derrida's more explicitly philosophical and complex argument on the same terms as Borges'; rather, it is to show different ways in which comparisons between Jewishness and postcoloniality can expose the problems, and possibilities, of comparativism itself.

*Monolinguisme de l'Autre* describes language as, by definition, colonial. Indeed, all culture is inherently colonial for Derrida, 'so much so that "colonialism" and "colonisation" are only high points [*reliefs*]' of the underlying

condition of culture.<sup>30</sup> Derrida argues that we must participate in the logic that demands that we have a language of ‘our own’, but there is no language entirely of ‘our own’ as language always comes from outside ourselves. One’s language is divided at the outset because it is never one’s own; there is thus a primary alienation from language. Derrida characterises this alienation as the alienation of the colonised, as language operates via colonial logic. Language ‘is always colonial’ as it is ‘that law originating from elsewhere’ – it is always an ‘outside’ force imposing itself – and because *a* language, or *a* culture, can only claim its existence as such through a claim to the necessity of homogeneity.<sup>31</sup> *Monolinguisme* is therefore intimately concerned with the relationship between the singular and the specific. Every alienation from language is undoubtedly specific, as it relates to the conditions of the individual’s unique alienation from language; Derrida notes that ‘[not] all exiles [from language] are equivalent’.<sup>32</sup> However, to be alienated from language is by no means ‘singular’, in the sense I use the term here, as *every* subject is *innately* alienated from language. The state of alienation from language is therefore a source of unique characteristics that can be recognised as marking one as unique, while it is also wholly ‘un-unique’. Whereas Borges’ comparison undoes the very specificity his lecture seemingly aims to recognise, Derrida makes specificity a general condition. This means that the condition of having *specific* characteristics that contribute to a group’s or individual’s uniqueness is not itself *singular*, or unique.

*Monolinguisme* describes this conception of language alongside and through description of the – apparently exceptional – Algerian Jewish community in which Derrida grew up. While Derrida notes the colonial ‘interdict against Arabic and Berber languages’ in Algerian schools, he suggests that this underlines that Jewish Algerian schoolchildren – unlike their classmates – had no other language than French.<sup>33</sup> “‘Ladino’ was not spoken in the Algeria I knew’, he writes, and so there was no ‘idiom internal to the Jewish community’.<sup>34</sup> Although, in Derrida’s argument, Arabic would be no more an ‘authentic’ language of one’s own than French – *all* language is colonial – in a more ‘empirical’ way than for any other group, the Jewish community of Algeria had no language of its own that was not also the language of the coloniser. The Jewish community thus represented the epitome of colonial alienation in Algeria, linguistically cut off from Arabic, Berber, or any wider Jewish culture, and culturally separated from metropolitan French culture.<sup>35</sup> As well as being exceptional among colonial Algerian subjects, Derrida also apparently suggests that Algerian Jews were exceptional among Jews. In a footnote about other Jewish writers’ relationships with their ‘mother tongues’, Derrida writes that in the Algeria he knew, Hebrew ‘was neither authentically nor widely taught’, while the French the Algerian Jews spoke was ‘only a French *of the colonised* – something the German [...] of the Ashkenazic [*sic*] Jews of Europe was not’.<sup>36</sup> Algerian

Jews' apparently unique situation suggests they are the ultimate exemplars of linguistic alienation, alienated both as Jews and as colonial subjects.

Derrida appears to claim that Algerian Jews' situation is singular – unique. What makes it unique is not its specificity – all alienation from language is specific, thus making 'specificity' universal – but its degree. Algerian Jews are the same as every other community, only more so – thereby marking them as *unlike* every other group. It might appear that Derrida is being wilfully myopic, chauvinistic even, in his prioritising of Algerian Jews as 'the most alienated' – as when Derrida apparently refers to himself as 'the only Franco-Maghrebian'.<sup>37</sup> Aside from the hyperbolic nature of such claims, a claim to exceptionality appears at best un-deconstructive, at worst a denial of the suffering of other victims of colonialism and fascism.<sup>38</sup> The Jewish community Derrida knew appears not only to be unique among Jews, or among colonised populations, but unique in world history. Such an argument appears to mean that Derrida is arguing against himself; if all 'exiles from language' are specific, it seems difficult to argue that one group is somehow 'more unique' than any other.

Additionally, the very act of comparing one group to another seems to contradict some of the terms of *Monolinguisme*. Derrida describes how colonial language, that is, *all* language, functions via a drive that aims to 'reduce language to the One, that is, to the hegemony of the homogeneous'.<sup>39</sup> The impulse to impose one logic under which differing terms can be compared is precisely this kind of totalisation, a 'reduction to the One', and so within the terms of Derrida's argument, to set up the Jewish community he describes as a point of comparison would be to argue under what he posits is a colonial rubric. However, since all language is colonial, there is nothing but colonial language and colonial thinking. Deconstruction does not allow us simply to 'step outside' of logocentrism or colonial thought; as Gayatri Spivak glosses, 'deconstruction [...] is a persistent critique of what one cannot not want'.<sup>40</sup> This is not to excuse explicitly totalising thinking; we must remain cautious of the homogenising tendency of comparativism. Yet comparative work is surely necessary to avoid claims such as 'this group are exceptional' – which would itself be totalising in denying all other experiences. The question therefore arises how Derrida's positioning of Algerian Jews as apparently exceptional when compared to other victims of colonialism can be justified – or more broadly, what kind of anti-colonial, or deconstructive, comparativism is possible, and how it would recognise multiple singular and specific modes of existence.

A suggestion of an important element of a non-totalising version of comparativism is made visible in Hiddleston's reading of another of Derrida's 'autobiographical' texts, 'Circonfession', in conjunction with his essay 'Abraham, l'Autre'. Moving between these two texts, Hiddleston argues that Derrida formulates an understanding of 'Jewishness' that is 'defined

by its resistance to definition. As a result, he who is the most Jewish is the least Jewish; the most exemplary Jew is the one who resists exemplarity'.<sup>41</sup> This is a familiarly Derridean and deconstructive gesture: the thing must be recognised as both 'itself' (inasmuch as such a notion ever exists within a deconstructive framework) and its 'opposite' simultaneously. This allows 'Jewishness' to be, argues Hiddleston, 'an example without exemplarity [...] the subject's representativity is precisely his resistance to the notion of the representative'.<sup>42</sup> Such a mode of thought demands from the reader 'an agile movement and constant negotiation between the specific, the singular and the universal [...] so that postcolonial thought must somehow, aporetically, engage with each level at once'.<sup>43</sup> *Monolinguisme* stages something similar to what Hiddleston describes here, inviting an understanding of 'the most specific' as the most representative, precisely *because of* that irreducible specificity. The Jewish community described in *Monolinguisme* is positioned as *exemplary*, at once exceptional and representative, of an underlying structure of all culture, and all relationships to language. In allowing for a deconstructive understanding of specific difference, we begin to move towards a non-totalising version of comparison, as totalisation is deconstructed by the fact that difference is always both specific and universal.

Yet this potentially leaves us unable to undertake comparative work in any meaningful way, if we are left with the simple conclusion that what is universal is difference. There is the danger that either abstract 'difference' becomes a universal, thus both denying specificity and working within a totalising logic; or the *exact* nature of the subject's irreducible specificity remains incomparable, regardless of whether the fact of specificity *in general* is comparable. If precisely what makes a group or subject representative is their 'difference' – whether understood as singularity, specificity or otherwise – then while we may be able to understand the relationship between the example and the rule, the 'part' and the 'whole' in a deconstructive manner, we are no nearer resolving whether de-colonial comparison that still recognises specificity is possible. We appear dangerously close to what Hallward, somewhat crudely, suggests links certain strains of postcolonial criticism to *Sesame Street* – a 'mere appreciation of the fact that "everyone is different and special in their own way."<sup>44</sup> In *Monolinguisme*, for example, it may well be the case that Algerian Jews are the ultimate victims of colonialism – but, within *Monolinguisme's* logic, so is everyone else. Notwithstanding a deconstructive understanding of the Algerian Jewish community's position as both specific and universal, it remains difficult to see how they can be presented as *primus inter pares*.

However, *Monolinguisme* does offer a path towards a non-totalising comparativism that still allows for the recognition of specificity, through the text's novel understanding of plurality. In Geoffrey Bennington's reading, plurality in *Monolinguisme* is understandable as a number of singularities that are 'the

same' under the rubric of originary (colonial) alienation, but that are not re-incorporated into a larger, totalising collective identity. The singular can never be entirely separate from the larger structure, such as colonialism or language, within which it occurs – nor, therefore, can it be wholly separated from the other singularities that contribute to forming and reinforcing that structure. Since, according to Derrida, there is no linguistic relationship outside of colonialism, any relationship to language is thus linked to the wider structure of colonialism – and every linguistic relationship it defines. This means that, as Bennington writes, 'every singularity also contains (or is affected by) every other. So every singularity is exemplary'.<sup>45</sup> Every individual or group becomes exemplary – singular *and* specific, serving as an example of a common condition, but not suffering the 'reduction to the One' as there is plurality, not totality. In Max Silverman's words, 'the singular is never complete in its singularity [...] but neither can the universal ever constitute a fixed law for all under the banner of sameness'.<sup>46</sup> 'Difference' is not reinscribed as a totalising basis under which comparison takes place; rather, there are only *multiple* specific singularities, which are simultaneously alike and not alike.

Derrida's example redefines comparison by putting forward not the idea of singularity standing for universality, but specificity as part of plurality. The apparent claim that the Algerian Jewish community are exceptional, or are the ultimate victims of colonialism, is thus shown to be both a wild exaggeration and utterly correct. The Algerian Jewish community are exemplary of the colonial effects of culture because it is through this community that we can see, 'empirically', the logic of language-as-colonialism that Derrida describes in the 'philosophical' element of *Monolinguisme*. For example, there is no proper Franco-Maghrebian Jewish culture, because there is no culture other than colonial culture; there can be no language proper to the Jewish community, because there is no language proper to any group. Equally, however, avoiding the logic of 'the hegemony of the homogenous', Algerian Jews *are* exceptional, as they are not merely an example interchangeable with any other. Derrida's apparent focus on himself as an example, and the relationship between the 'biographical' and 'philosophical' elements of *Monolinguisme*, are to be understood similarly. The 'Derrida' figure of the 'biographical' elements of the text, or the Franco-Maghrebian Jewish community, are exceptional because every example is exceptional and should not be – cannot be – subsumed to a totalising logic. Every group is 'the most'.

In Derrida's text, it is the collision of Jewishness and coloniality that reveals the underlying condition of all culture, and that helps to fight against the tendency towards a colonial 'hegemony of the homogenous'. *Monolinguisme* is therefore typically Derridean in its ambivalence. It does not merely compare, but conflates, two different relationships to hegemonic

power, Jewishness and coloniality, precisely to show the dangers of reducing difference to a logic of sameness. In place of singularity, we must recognise specificity; in place of the universal, plurality. The version of comparison that *Monolinguisme* proposes is not a homogenising impulse, but an exhortation to recognise a multiplicity of specific singularities irreducible to a unified whole, cautioning us against the ‘tendency to homogenise the heterogeneous, either on the side of the particular or local, or on the side of the general or universal’.<sup>47</sup> What *Monolinguisme*’s exaggerated focus on one community allows for is a model of comparativism that recognises the specific without reifying it into abstract singularity.

## Conclusion

Comparisons between Jewish and postcolonial subjects can productively draw attention to previously under-recognised commonalities. Yet comparison necessarily involves a complex negotiation of the singularity and specificity of the subjects of comparison. Both texts discussed here show, albeit in necessarily specific ways, some of the challenges of this negotiation. Borges’ text shows that drawing attention to singularity can be an effacement of the very culture that is apparently celebrated, if the recognition of singularity and specificity within a comparison is inconsistent. In ‘El Escritor Argentino’, Jewish writers are a symbol of ‘difference’, but little more, therefore removing their very reason for being noted in Borges’ argument. Meanwhile, Derrida’s argument’s complexity and self-consciousness does not necessarily excuse its arguable stereotyping of Jewishness as victimhood. Its seeming focus on one group at the expense of others, however, can form the basis of a model that would greatly serve Postcolonial Studies, post-Holocaust thinking, or any combination of the two, in allowing for a version of comparativism that still recognises specificity. Non-totalising understandings of singularity and universality are able to coexist, even to be recognised at the same time, in the way of thinking *Monolinguisme* begins to practise, reformulating these terms as specificity and plurality.

However, given that, as Derrida puts it, ‘nothing of what preoccupies me’ could be explained without reference to a ‘Judeo-Franco-Maghrebian genealogy’, Derrida’s argument and method could not be applicable to describing any other situation or context.<sup>48</sup> The challenge before us, as scholars, is to imagine a new version of ‘plurality’ for each new context, or combination of contexts. Such scholarship would treat Derrida’s text both as a model, and as inapplicable for any other context – performing the very kind of comparison with *Monolinguisme* that the text itself describes. It would equally be able to draw the same kinds of surprising and inventive comparisons that Borges does, but imagining a version of comparison that truly recognises the specificity of each new context. Comparative work that does justice to



the specificity of the cultures, people and texts in question requires not just a focus on the nuances of that specificity, but also the imagination of new critical possibilities.

## Notes

1. Discussions of this issue are practically foundational to 'Postcolonial Studies' as a field: see, for example, Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge, 'What is Post(-)colonialism?', *Textual Practice*, 5.3 (1991), pp. 399–414, and Anne McClintock, 'The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term "Post-colonialism"', *Social Text* (1992), pp. 1–15.
2. Peter Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing Between the Singular and the Specific* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 36.
3. On the logic of the example, see Alexander Gelley (ed.), *Unruly Examples: On the Rhetoric of Exemplarity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995).
4. Hallward, p. xii.
5. In addition to mid-twentieth century linkages of antisemitism and imperial oppression, such as Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972) and Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Penguin Classics, 2017), more recent examples of the growing body of work linking Jewish Studies and Postcolonial Studies include Aamir Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); and Marc Caplan, *How Strange the Change: Language, Temporality and Narrative Form in Peripheral Modernisms* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).
6. On the latter, see Brian Cheyette, *Diasporas of the Mind: Jewish and Postcolonial Writing and the Nightmare of History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).
7. Hallward, p. 39; italics in original.
8. Hallward, p. 39.
9. Jane Hiddleston, *Poststructuralism and Postcoloniality: The Anxiety of Theory* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), p. 38.
10. On Borges' longstanding fascination with 'Jewish' themes, key sources other than those referenced here include Edna Aizenberg, *The Aleph Weaver: Biblical, Kabbalistic and Judaic Elements in Borges* (Potomac, MD: Scripta Humanistica, 1984) and Jaime Alazraki, *Borges and the Kabbalah: And Other Essays on his Fiction and Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). See also Robin Fiddian, *Postcolonial Borges: Argument and Artistry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), both on Borges as a 'postcolonial intellectual' and the ways in which his writing explores ideas associated with 'the postcolonial.' As discussed below, Derrida's engagement with his own biography means his position as a 'Jewish' writer is inevitably linked to his position as a 'postcolonial' writer. Even leaving aside Derrida's influence on postcolonial theory more broadly, the literature on Derrida and 'postcolonial' and/or 'Jewish' themes is immense; as a representative sample, see Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington



- (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 423–31; Hélène Cixous, *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint*, trans. Beverly Bie Brahic (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); and Bettina Bergo, Joseph Cohen and Raphael Zagury-Orly (eds.), *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).
11. Erin Graff Zivin, 'Deconstruction and its Precursors: Levinas and Borges After Derrida', in Erin Graff Zivin (ed.), *The Marrano Specter: Derrida and Hispanism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), pp. 138–52, p. 151.
  12. Ilan Stavans, *Borges, the Jew* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), pp. ix–x. Indeed, so convinced is Stavans of the depth of Borges' engagement with Jewish themes that Borges is the only non-Jewish writer included in Stavans' *Oy, Caramba! An Anthology of Jewish Stories from Latin America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2016).
  13. Amy A. Kaminsky, *Argentina: Stories for a Nation* (Ann Arbor: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 124.
  14. The lecture has also been suggested to be more about Borges defending himself, either against accusations that he was not 'sufficiently Argentine,' or against the antisemitic editorial in the journal *Crisol* that prompted Borges' earlier 'Yo, Judío'; see Daniel Balderston, 'Borges: The Argentine Writer and the "Western" Tradition', in Evelyn Fishburn (ed.), *Borges and Europe Revisited* (London: Institute of Latin American Studies, 1998), pp. 37–48, p. 46, and Yitzhak Lewis, 'Modeling Marginality: Borges, Veblen and the Argentine Writer', *Variaciones Borges* 44 (2017), pp. 173–88, p. 175.
  15. Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Argentine Writer and Tradition', trans. Esther Allen, in *Selected Non-Fictions*, pp. 420–7, p. 426. It is notable that Borges describes the 'Western [occidental]' tradition, not 'European.' This ambiguous term raises the question of whether South America itself counts as 'Western' if it participates in the 'Western tradition'; whether 'Western' includes, for example, the USA – Borges names Mark Twain as an example (p. 424); what the difference might be between Anglo-America and Hispano-America; and the potential role of African diasporic or Native cultures in South America's (non-) 'Westernness.' For a useful summary of how later Latin American critics theorised '(post-)Occidentalism,' as distinct from '(post)colonialism', see Fiddian, pp. 7–10.
  16. Borges, 'Argentine Writer', p. 426
  17. *Ibid.*, p. 426. 'Jewishness' and 'Irishness' have been linked as forms of 'otherness' since the early twentieth century; see M. Alison Kibler, 'Paddy, Shylock and Sambo: Irish, Jewish and African American Efforts to Ban Racial Ridicule on Stage and Screen', in Marc Howard Ross (ed.), *Culture and Belonging in Divided Societies: Contestation and Symbolic Landscapes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), pp. 259–80.
  18. Erin Graff Zivin, *The Wandering Signifier: Rhetoric of Jewishness in the Latin American Imaginary* (London: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 12.
  19. Here Borges could be seen as imagining something like Edward Said's understanding of the intellectual-as-'exile'; see, for example, Edward Said, 'The Mind of Winter: Reflections on a Life in Exile', *Harpers*, no. 269 (1984), pp. 49–55. Cheyette contrasts Said's 'exile' with a conception of 'diaspora' – a distinction

- that is not irrelevant in the seemingly non-communal version of ‘Jewishness’ Borges describes; Cheyette, p. 18–28.
20. Borges, ‘Argentine Writer’, p. 426.
  21. Thorstein Veblen, ‘The Intellectual Pre-Eminence of Jews in Modern Europe’, *Political Science Quarterly* 34.1 (1919), pp. 33–42, p. 38, in JSTOR <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2141518>> [Date accessed: 10 May 2019].
  22. Borges, ‘Argentine Writer’, p. 423.
  23. Lewis, ‘Modeling Marginality’, p. 178.
  24. Borges, ‘Argentine Writer’, p. 426.
  25. *Ibid.*, p. 426.
  26. This point is made more explicitly in ‘a conversation of 1978’ that Stavans translates, in which Borges reiterates that ‘a Jew, aside from being English, French, German or whatever, is always a Jew. He is not tied by *any* form of loyalty or especial tradition, which allows him to innovate in science and the arts’; Stavans, pp. 43–44, emphasis added. Although Stavans does not provide a reference for this conversation, Lewis describes an apparently different interview, also from 1978, in which Borges is specifically asked about Israel and yet cites Veblen’s argument about (European) Jews once again; Lewis, p. 186.
  27. Jonathan Boyarin has criticised postcolonial theorists, in particular Gayatri Spivak, for a similar monolithic understanding of ‘Europe’ that negates the disposition of, for example, Jewish and Roma people: Jonathan Boyarin, *Thinking in Jewish* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 194.
  28. For example, in ‘Anotación al 23 Agosto 1944’, Borges decries his fellow Argentinians for being caught up in pro-Nazi sentiment: ‘they are anti-Semitic [*sic*], but they profess a religion of Hebrew origin [...] they denounce imperialism, but they defend and proclaim the theory of *Lebensraum*’. Borges, ‘A Comment on August 23, 1944’, *Selected Non-Fictions*, pp. 210–11, p. 210, trans. Suzanne Jill Levine.
  29. The concept of ‘total singularity’ – genuine uniqueness – is one of the central concerns of Derrida’s entire oeuvre, from the focus on ‘iterability’ – the repeatability, and therefore *non*-singularity, of writing – to the argument that ‘there is no democracy without respect for irreducible singularity’ in *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 2005), p. 22, and the idea of the ‘messianic’ as an utterly unique event in *Spectres de Marx*. It could be said that the utterly singular is also infinitely specific.
  30. Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, or the Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 24.
  31. Derrida, *Monolingualism*, pp. 39–40.
  32. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
  33. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
  34. *Ibid.*, p. 55. The inverted commas are Derrida’s.
  35. *Ibid.*, pp. 52–53.
  36. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
  37. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
  38. This apparent hyperbole is perhaps most pronounced in Derrida’s claim that the French Vichy government’s 1940 abolition of the Crémieux decree of 1870 that had granted French citizenship to Algerian Jews – meaning all Algerian Jews were left with no national citizenship at all – was a unique situation: ‘I do not know whether there are other examples of this in the history of

- modern nation-states, examples of such a deprivation of citizenship decreed for tens and tens of thousands of people at a time'; Derrida, *Monolingualism*, p. 17. This is a bizarre claim given that the German Reich Citizenship Law, effectively stripping many German Jews of citizenship, had been enacted only five years earlier. As Derrida notes however, the Algerian decree was enacted by the *French* government: 'one never saw a German uniform in Algeria', p. 17. As well as drawing attention to the irony of the phrase 'the Occupation' for a French colonial subject, such a distinction raises another interesting parallel between colonialism and Nazism. Pal Ahluwalia sees the trauma of Derrida's loss of citizenship as reflected throughout his biography and writing; *Out of Africa: Post-Structuralism's Colonial Roots* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 74–82.
39. Derrida, *Monolingualism*, p. 40.
  40. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Bonding in Difference – An Interview with Alfred Arteaga', in Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean (ed.), *The Spivak Reader* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 15–28, p. 28.
  41. Hiddleston, *Poststructuralism and Postcoloniality*, p. 37.
  42. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
  43. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
  44. Hallward, p. 41.
  45. Geoffrey Bennington, 'Double Tonguing: Derrida's Monolingualism', *Tympanum*, 4 (2000) <<http://www.usc.edu/dept/comp-lit/tympanum/4/bennington.html>> [Date accessed: 15 November 2015].
  46. Max Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film* (New York: Berghahn, 2013), p. 153.
  47. Michael Syrotinski, *Deconstruction and the Postcolonial* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), p. 23.
  48. Derrida, *Monolingualism*, pp. 71–72.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## ORCID

Edmund Chapman  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1934-6004>