

between the Semites and the Aryans which Orientalism and Semitism consecrated, but also between all three groups in the name of an equalizing gesture. In its elision and forgetting of the Semitic, for Derrida the memory of the Abrahamic, as we will see later, is instrumental for this gesture owing to its emphasis on "religion" rather than race.

I will argue that engaging the politics of memory in the case of Semitism is crucial for our understanding of the lives of those whom Semitism has interpellated and interpellates as Semites to this day. This will bring us to the Jewish Question and to the Palestinian Question, or to the Palestinian Question as the Jewish Question. The Palestinian Question in the last thirty years has come to be seen in the West as an essential part of the Muslim Question, if not the very Question of Islam.<sup>5</sup> As both Palestinians and Jews inhabit the taxonomy "Semite," I want to discuss the way their question(s) constitutes the Semitic Question—indeed how the Semite became a Question, for Europe.

## Semites and Orientals

But, what exactly is Semitism and what does it have to do with the Palestinians? We know much about anti-Semitism and how in popular European and American understanding it has much to do with Jews as victims of it. Increasingly the Euro-American and European depiction has it that Muslims, Arabs, and often Palestinians are perpetrators of it. But what is this Semitism that anti-Semitism is opposed to, that it wants to persecute, to oppress? Why have recent accounts—or memories?—of anti-Semitism forgotten the history of Semitism? Why do they often fail to remember the Semites in their historiography? Are Muslims, or specifically Palestinians as a metonym for them, in these memories opposed to Semitism, to the Semites, and if so, why would they oppose them? Are they in fact victims or perpetrators of Semitism, or of anti-Semitism? The crucial question that I want to pose is whether anti-Semitism is indeed the enemy of Semitism at all, or if their relationship is of a different order altogether.

When Edward Said embarked on his study of Orientalism, he explained that "by almost an inescapable logic, I have found myself writing the history of a strange, secret sharer of Western anti-Semitism. That

5. See Anne Norton, *On the Muslim Question* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

bring about this fuller humanity that Carter insisted on. Although I am sympathetic to Carter's, Derrida's, and Massignon's projects of seeking to eliminate oppression, or what they might call "conflict" or "violence," I am troubled by what their positing of the Abrahamic as the filiative and affiliative link between the three monotheistic communities must forget to bring that about, namely how the deployment of the Abrahamic is linked to the Semitic, to the Semite.

Perhaps a return to Massignon is in order. Massignon's neologism might have been an outcome of his Catholic faith, which defined much of his life, or an outcome of some other Orientalist passion, or a combination of both. In his discussion of Massignon's notion of the Abrahamic, which he couples with a discussion of Emmanuel Levinas's work, Derrida expresses a need "to answer a concern that you might share with me, I imagine, regarding the ellipsis, if not the exclusion, in any case the active silence with which [Massignon's project of Badalya, which included Arab Christians] suppresses, walls in, chokes all fraternity with those who have, after all some right to figure in an Abrahamic prayer front—to wit, the Jews."<sup>61</sup> Although, on the one hand, Derrida wants to reference Massignon's concern for the Palestinian refugees of the 1948 war (a concern that Derrida himself does not seem to share) by quoting his journal entry from 1949 (while claiming mistakenly that "the three prayers" were written in 1923), at the same time, he wants to remind his readers of clues to Massignon's position on Jews. Derrida concludes that Massignon's bourgeois French Catholicism "to which one could add other characteristics, leaves us with the feeling of some probability of anti-Semitism."<sup>62</sup> Here Derrida wants to insist that the Abrahamic must be inclusive by demonstrating how for Massignon, it, on occasion, slips into an exclusive realm, one that excludes the Jews.

Although Massignon's motive in conjuring up the Abrahamic was one of self-declared Christian love for the rest of the children of Abraham that was punctuated by racialist criteria, Levinas's views on Palestinians were also troubling. But Derrida does not seem to pay similar attention to Levinas's anti-Palestinian ethics, which exclude Palestinians (as Muslims) from the Abrahamic, as he did to Massignon's probable anti-Semitism, though he is careful to remind us that "Levinas declares nothing but the greatest respect for Islam."<sup>63</sup>

anti-Semitism . . . and Orientalism resemble each other very closely is a historical, cultural, and political truth that needs only to be mentioned to an Arab Palestinian for its irony to be perfectly understood."<sup>6</sup> Here I must remind us that the time the Semite became a question was a time when many of the questions Europe had to consider from the late eighteenth century onwards had to do with the Orient; not least among them was the question of the Oriental Ottoman Empire whose presence in Europe and the necessity to evict it from Europe, as we saw in chapter 1, was coded the "Eastern Question." The almost contemporaneous emergence of the "Jewish Question" dealt with the presence of another people, also identified as "Orientals," who had been present for millennia in the heart of Europe. Said's invoking of anti-Semitism as the "secret sharer" of Orientalism, a term he borrows from Joseph Conrad,<sup>7</sup> is instructive. In his famous short story, Conrad identifies his "secret sharer" as a "second self," "my other self," a "double" or, as Said himself put it, as a "mirror."<sup>8</sup> The Oriental and the Semite, the Orientalist and the anti-Semite, Orientalism and anti-Semitism are therefore second selves to one another, doubles, and mirror reflections that must always be read and seen in tandem.

The category of the Semite was invented by European philologists in the eighteenth century and was transformed in the nineteenth from a linguistic into a racial category. Ernest Renan was perhaps one of the most illustrious Orientalists who helped bring about this transformation. For Renan, the "Semitic spirit" had two forms: "The Hebraic or Mosaic form, and the Arabic or Islamic form."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, according to such representations, as Said summarizes them, "The Semites are rabid monotheists who produced no mythology, no art, no commerce, no civilization; their consciousness is a narrow and rigid one; all in all they represent 'an inferior combination of human nature.'<sup>10</sup> For Renan (1823-92), as for Semitic studies, or Semitics, as it was called, "The Jew is like the Arab' and vice versa."<sup>11</sup> In this regard, the fact that medieval Christians, including the Crusaders, referred to Arabs as "Saracens," as

6. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 27-28.

7. I thank Andrew Ruben for alerting me to this.

8. See Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Sharer*, in Conrad's *The Nigger of the "Narcisso" and Other Stories*

it to a large audience."<sup>20</sup> The connection of modern Jews to the ancient Hebrews (insistently made by Catholic Christianity and more so the Protestant Reformation) remained part of an unresolved academic debate at the time, but the question of the origin of the Semites seemed to have been resolved. Indeed, with the increasing identification of Semites with Africa, some Jews seeking full assimilation into whiteness began to retreat from the claim, forgetting it altogether in favor of another memory. Martin A. Meyer, a Reform rabbi in San Francisco and a scholar of Semitic studies, felt it necessary in 1909 to declare that American Jews shared more with non-Jewish white Americans than they did with "the Arab of the desert, the true representative of the Semitic world of yore," or even with the Jews of the Middle East.<sup>21</sup> Meyer claimed that although the ancient Jews who came out of the desert were Semites like the Arabs, their blood was "rapidly diluted." He concluded that "today, but little of that original Semitic blood will be found in the veins of any of us."<sup>22</sup> Another Reform rabbi, Samuel Sale, added that "we can not get away from the bald fact, based on anatomical measurements, that only about five percent of all the Jews bear the characteristic mark of their Semitic origin on their body."<sup>23</sup> Here the act of disavowal is not only a psychic one but decidedly physiological, when bodies are said to forget their origins except for a few remaining traces.

Another strategy to disavow the African origin hypothesis was to continue to embrace the Semitic identity but to argue that Semites were in fact white, having originated in the Caucasus and not in Africa, as some Jewish anthropologists and some Zionists argued.<sup>24</sup> The predominant Zionist explanation, however, for the condition of Jews in Europe would differ from that in the United States, insofar as the European Zionists (unlike their US counterparts, who rejected anti-Semitic descriptions of Jews as prejudiced mischaracterizations) accepted (anti-)Semitic descriptions of Jews, which, however, unlike the anti-Semites, they explained by recourse to the Jewish history of persecution that they claimed caused these traits, and not necessarily to innate racial characteristics.

Zionism was predicated on the double operation of remembering and forgetting: for Zionism stipulated on the one hand that modern Jews must remember their peoplehood, that the Hebrews were their ancestors, and that Hebrew culture had always been their heritage which

20. *Ibid.*, 108.

21. Cited in *ibid.*, 109.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Cited in *ibid.*

24. See *ibid.*, 111, 179.