

## Thinking through and beyond “Competitive Memory” and Hierarchies of Suffering

Steven Robins

*The entry point for my response to Bryan Cheyette’s thought-provoking essay on the difficulties of bringing together Jewish studies and postcolonial studies is a discussion of a recent national controversy in South Africa that, at first glance, seems to endorse Cheyette’s cautionary tale about how “actionism” tends to negate nuance and critical engagement. The response draws on this controversy to make some tentative observations about why Cheyette’s argument does not adequately acknowledge the consequences of the profound political, ideological, and economic transformations of post-World War II Jewry.*

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In his essay “Against Supersessionist Thinking: Old and New, Jews and Postcolonialism, the Ghetto and Diaspora,” Bryan Cheyette identifies some of the disciplinary and political obstacles in the path of a more productive engagement between Jewish studies and postcolonial studies.<sup>1</sup> This state of affairs is particularly concerning to Cheyette given that “the interface between Jewish and postcolonial studies has long been recognized (going back to Hannah Arendt, Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, Jean Amery, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Primo Levi)” (7). Why, then, he asks, have Jewish studies and postcolonial scholars not engaged more with each other? This is especially intriguing given Willi Goetschel and Ato Quayson’s recent suggestion that the “Jewish experience of modernity can be said to provide fertile templates for understanding questions as varied as minoritarianism, diaspora, nostalgia, racialization, ethnicity, cultural difference, creolization, hybridity and colonialism, all of which are central

Steven Robins is a professor in the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology at the University of Stellenbosch. He has published on a wide range of topics including the politics of land, “development,” and identity in Zimbabwe and South Africa; the Truth & Reconciliation Commission (TRC); urban citizenship and governance and experimental ethnography dealing with Holocaust family memory; identity and history. His book publications include *From Revolution to Rights in South Africa: Social Movements, NGOs and Popular Politics* (2008), *Limits to Liberation after Apartheid: Citizenship, Governance and Culture* (2005), and he co-edited book (with Nick Shepherd) *New South African Keywords* (2008). His most recent book is *Letters of Stone: From Nazi Germany to South Africa* (Penguin Random House, 2016). (Email: robins@netactive.co.za)

1 Cheyette, Bryan, “Against Supersessionist Thinking: Old and New, Jews and Postcolonialism, the Ghetto and Diaspora,” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Inquiry* 4.3 (2017): 424–39.

concerns in postcolonial studies” (8).<sup>2</sup> So, what is the nature of these barriers to exploring these intersections between Jewish and postcolonial studies?

Cheyette suggests that this absence of sustained dialogue between postcolonial studies and Jewish studies could be partly due to what Theodor Adorno once referred to as “actionism.” Adorno used this term to refer to the privileging of political action over critical thought at a time when he was at loggerheads with the ’68 student activists. For Cheyette, like Adorno, whenever “actionism” surfaces, “clarity and certainty of political action is privileged over scholarly nuance and complexity (“praxis” over “theory”). This loss of nuance is examined through a set of related binaries (supersessionism, foundationalism, and disciplinarity) (1).

Cheyette’s argument draws on a discussion of postcolonial literature as well as an account of the disciplining practices of postcolonial and memory studies, especially in relation to the Holocaust. A key element to Cheyette’s overall argument is how “actionism” allows for supersessionist thinking whereby the “old Jews,” who were formerly world-historical victims and an oppressed and marginalized people in Europe, come to be seen in the post–World War II period as the “new Germans” responsible for the ongoing persecution of Palestinians. Cheyette concludes that this type of thinking typically ends up “reduc[ing] critical thinking to polemic and makes it all but impossible to explore interconnected Jewish and postcolonial histories.” He suggests that only by confronting such polemics in scholarly work that it becomes possible to work toward closer collaboration between postcolonial studies and Jewish studies.

The entry point for my response to this thought-provoking essay is a discussion of a recent national controversy in South Africa that seems to endorse Cheyette’s cautionary tale about “actionism.” I then draw on this controversy to make some tentative observations about why, in my opinion, Cheyette’s argument does not adequately acknowledge the consequences of the profound political, ideological, and economic transformations of post–World War II Jewry.

In August 2017, South African Black First Land First (BLF) activist Andile Mngxitima tweeted: “For those claiming the legacy of the holocaust is ONLY negative, think about the lampshades and Jewish soap.” Later that day he sent another tweet: “The aroma of the burning flesh from the furnace of the holocaust may wet [sic] the appetite of the SA cannibals.”<sup>3</sup> The South African Jewish Board of Deputies responded with public statements expressing outrage and immediately initiated legal action. Social media also exploded with condemnation. In a radio interview with talk show host Eusebius McKaiser, the veteran social activist Zackie Achmat insisted that although he rejected the pro-Zionist politics of Jewish leaders such as the Chief Rabbi, he would defend them were they to be attacked for being Jewish. Achmat, like many other progressive citizens and activists, denounced Mngxitima’s tweets as anti-Semitic.

Mngxitima claimed that he was merely responding to a tweet sent five months earlier by Democratic Alliance premier of the Western Cape Province Helen Zille.

2 Willi Goetschel and Ato Quayson, “Introduction: Jewish Studies and Postcolonialism,” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 3.1 (2015), 10 and throughout.

3 Bheki Mbanjwa and Kamini Padayachee, “Jewish Board Takes BLF to Equality Court,” *Cape Times*, September 7, 2017. This bizarre mention of “SA cannibals” refers to recent reports of cannibalism in rural parts of South Africa.

Premier Zille had created a political storm when she tweeted: “For those claiming the legacy of colonialism was ONLY negative, think of our independent judiciary, transport infrastructure, piped water, etc.” This too triggered public outrage, culminating in the Democratic Alliance leadership’s decision to institute disciplinary proceedings against the premier. In response to public outrage, Zille mentioned her own German Jewish ancestry and claimed that she did not imply that colonialism was “a good thing” or legitimate and that she had always fought all forms of racism.

Mngxitima’s response to the Zille tweet implied that South African Jews cared about the Holocaust, but they, like other whites, did not care about the centuries of racism and oppression unleashed on black people by slavery, colonialism, and apartheid. In a statement to *The Daily Vox*, Mngxitima claimed: “I’m just paraphrasing her [Premier Zille], literally. That’s all. . . . I wanted to show the hypocrisy and double standard that black suffering is totally disregarded, and in fact it’s encouraged. . . . It [the Holocaust] is the niggerisation of white people for a moment. We are being niggerised for 500 years or more. We live through the Holocaust.”<sup>4</sup>

Mngxitima then went on to defend his response to Zille’s tweets by arguing that he had used Holocaust myths about “Jewish soap and lampshades” to challenge the myths generated by colonialism: “It’s a myth that the separation of powers of the judiciary or technological development are a [positive] consequence of colonialists. My comparison is actually apt, completely. It carries the intensity of the offence, the intensity of erasure, the intensity of the lie that is contained in Helen Zille’s tweet.” Mngxitima insisted that his tweets also exposed the unethical stance of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) as expressed through their selective outrage: “If you are not offended by Zille basically reducing our holocaust, the black holocaust, why do you care for any holocaust?”<sup>5</sup> When called upon to apologize to the Jewish community, he refused, claiming that they had not apologized for their role in the historical oppression of blacks. “I’m the one who is owed an apology here. Have they apologised for slavery, for colonialism, for land theft, for racism, for fascism, for Zionism?”<sup>6</sup> In an interview with *The Mercury* newspaper, Mngxitima responded to the SAJBD’s call for him to participate in an education program conducted by the Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre by accusing the board of “white supremacist tendencies.”<sup>7</sup>

The content of Mngxitima’s tweets seems to conform to what Michael Rothberg refers to as a “zero-sum competition” between collective memories and commemorations of slavery, black racism, and the Holocaust.<sup>8</sup> For Rothberg, a pitfall of this kind of competitive memory is that it leads to the assertion of seemingly incompatible legacies of slavery and the Nazi genocide in the United States. He notes that for those who endorse this zero-sum logic, it is unacceptable that there is a

4 Nolwandle Zondi and Rumana Akoob, “Mngxitima on Holocaust tweets: I’m just paraphrasing Helen Zille,” *Mail & Guardian*, Aug 25, 2017, 22:30, <https://mg.co.za/article/2017-08-25-mngxitima-on-holocaust-tweets-im-just-paraphrasing-helen-zille>.

5 Zondi and Akoob, “Mngxitima on Holocaust tweets.”

6 *Ibid.*

7 “Jewish Board Takes BLF to Equality Court.”

8 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

federally funded US Holocaust Museum at the Mall in Washington DC but, until recently, there was no commemoration there of slavery or American racism. Rothberg also cites Khalid Muhammad’s public statement after visiting the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1994 in which he insisted that “the black holocaust was 100 times worse than the so-called Jew Holocaust. You say you lost six million . . . we lost 600 million. Schindler’s List is really a swindler’s list.”<sup>9</sup> For Khalid Muhammad, like Mngxitama, Holocaust memory “crowds out” centuries of black suffering and black history in public consciousness. Similar claims have been made about the Native American genocide, colonialism, apartheid, the Palestinian Nakba (Catastrophe), and ongoing Israeli military occupation.

Although the polemical style of the statements of Andile Mngxitama and Khaleed Mohammad may lack nuance, they nonetheless resonate with widely held observations about the pervasiveness and foundationalism of what Norman Finkelstein (2000), controversially, has referred to as “the Holocaust Industry.”<sup>10</sup> According to Finkelstein, this massive largely US-driven Holocaust memory apparatus exploits Jewish suffering both for financial and political gain and provides ideological support for Israel and Zionism. A cursory scan of the donor landscape would no doubt also confirm that funding for museums and commemorative projects on the Holocaust overshadows that of memory projects on slavery, colonialism, and black experiences of racism. Given these realities, it is perhaps not entirely surprising that some postcolonial scholars may share these concerns about the “crowding out” of public memory of slavery, colonialism, and antiblack racism. They also question the ways in which the “Holocaust industry” can end up reproducing hierarchies of suffering?<sup>11</sup>

Michael Rothberg’s antidote to this seemingly pervasive zero-sum approach is “multidirectional memory,” a concept that draws on some of the earliest responses by black and Jewish intellectuals to the Nazi genocide. As Cheyette observes in his account of Rothberg’s argument, these early responses identified intertwined histories and intimate intersections among the Holocaust, colonialism, and antiblack racism.<sup>12</sup> For example, in 1949, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt used the concept of the “boomerang effect” to draw attention to the links between European imperialism and the Nazi genocide.<sup>13</sup> She called for a reading of the history of Nazi terror back through the violence of imperialism. Similarly, in 1950, in an essay entitled *Discourse of Colonialism*, Aime Cesaire drew on the concept of “backlash” or “reverse shock” to describe the unanticipated debt of Nazi totalitarianism to colonialism.<sup>14</sup> Two years later, in an article entitled “The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto,” African American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois rearticulated his concept of “double consciousness” to

9 Ibid., 1.

10 Norman G. Finkelstein, *Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (London: Verso Books, 2000).

11 Finkelstein’s *Holocaust Industry* has become part of a wider critique of the ways in which Jewish suffering and victimhood have been appropriated for ethno-nationalist narratives linking the Nazi genocide to Israeli nationalism and Zionism. An example of this is “The March of the Living,” which starts in Auschwitz and ends with a redemptive ritual of Zionist pilgrimage in Jerusalem.

12 Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, 23.

13 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt [1951] 1968).

14 Aime Cesaire, *Discourse of Colonialism* (Paris and Dakar: Presence Africaine, 1955).

incorporate the historical experiences of other minority groups, including Jews.<sup>15</sup> For Rothberg, these early responses to the Nazi genocide exemplify the workings of multidirectional networks of memory that were subsequently replaced by zero-sum competitive memory and the assertion of ethno-nationalist hierarchies of suffering.<sup>16</sup> For instance, Steven Katz's claim about the "historically and phenomenologically unique" character of the Holocaust attempts to ensure that the Nazi genocide is incomparable to any other.

The emergence of this kind of zero-sum logic can be located within a series of interconnected post-World War II shifts. The most profound of these shifts occurred when Jews, who were previously a hyper-marginalized and vulnerable European minority, became powerful economically, culturally, and politically in the United States. Jews also now had a strong militarized nation-state (Israel) supported by the United States, the most powerful superpower on the planet. During this period, Jews were able to create for themselves a secure position in both Israel and the diaspora. As Enzo Traverso (2016) notes in *The End of Jewish Modernity*, the virtual destruction by the Nazis of European Jewry, including a sizable left-leaning and progressive intelligentsia, was followed by a shift whereby mainstream diasporic Jews became increasingly more politically and economically secure as well as more conservative and Zionist.<sup>17</sup> It is within this context that Mngxitima views South African Jews simply as whites who benefitted from colonialism and apartheid. Yet, as scholars such as Claudia Braude, Milton Shain, and others have shown, South African Jews were not always as "white" as Mngxitima assumes.

In my recent book, *Letters of Stone: From Nazi Germany to South Africa*,<sup>18</sup> I discuss how Eastern European working-class Jews arriving in Cape Town in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were initially seen by the white colonial establishment as strange-looking and unwanted foreigners.<sup>19</sup> It took some time before Eastern European Jews were able to assimilate into middle-class whiteness in South Africa. In fact, their upward mobility triggered deep resentment and anti-Semitism among poor whites who lost their farms during the economic crises of the 1920s. It was poor whites' resentment of Jewish control over commerce in the small towns

15 W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto," *Jewish Life* 6.7 (May 1952): 14–15.

16 In reflecting on the historical grounds for claiming a "non-competitive" approach to memory of collective suffering, Heidi Grunebaum (personal communication, September 2017) makes the important observation that Jews "became white" in a post-Holocaust world through the various repressions of Jewish difference within Euro-American Jewish thought. She refers here to the different historical trajectories of Arab and North African Jews or Ottoman Jews, which, after Holocaust and the founding of the Jewish state, have produced a kind of bifurcation of Arabness or African-ness and Jewishness. Grunebaum notes that the work of intellectuals and artists who live this "double consciousness"—for instance Ammiel Alcalay, Ella Shohat, and Sami Chetrit—are peripheral if not absent from Jewish studies during the post-World War II period. In other words, Jewishness is itself contested, multiple, and heterogeneous in ways that complicate competitive memory and ethno-nationalist narratives of collective suffering and victimhood.

17 Enzo Traverso, *The End of Jewish Modernity*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Pluto Press, 2016).

18 Steven Robins, *Letters of Stone: From Nazi Germany to South Africa* (Cape Town: Penguin Random House Publishers South Africa, 2016).

19 Milton Shain, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in South Africa* (Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand Press, 1994); Milton Shain, *A Perfect Storm: Anti-Semitism in South Africa, 1930–1948* (Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2015).

and cities that was mobilized in the 1930s and 1940s by the Nazi-supporting Afrikaner leadership, including National Party (NP) leaders such as D. F. Malan, H. F. Verwoerd, and B. J. Vorster, all of whom were to become prime ministers after the NP came to power in 1948. It was these leaders' successes in lobbying for the 1937 Aliens Act that ultimately prevented German Jewish refugees from entering South Africa in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In 1936, pro-Nazi Greyshirts protested in large numbers, when *The Stuttgart*, a liner with more than 500 German Jewish refugees, tried to dock in Cape Town harbor. It was only after the NP came to power in 1948 that Prime Minister D. F. Malan invited Jews into the white fold. The whitening of South African Jewry, and their acceptance by the new Afrikaner ruling class, was complicated by the disproportionate involvement of Jews in the South African Communist Party (SACP). Joe Slovo, Ruth First, Pauline Podbrey, Arthur Goldreich, Ben Turok, Denis Goldberg, Harold Wolpe, and Ronnie Kasrils are only some of the many Jews who joined the anti-apartheid struggle. Of the 156 activists arrested for treason against the apartheid state in 1956, twenty-three were white, and fourteen were Jewish. And, in 1963, when seventeen ANC and SACP leaders were arrested at Liliesleaf Farm in Rivonia, Johannesburg, all five of the whites were Jewish. As in the Treason trial, the defense team at the Rivonia trial was largely made up of Jewish advocates. By the early 1960s, most Jewish communists were either in prison or in exile. Meanwhile, mainstream Jewry had taken up the Faustian bargain of full membership within white fold and become both apartheid bystanders and loyal supporters of the State of Israel. Acceptance had come with acquiescence and political conservatism. Historical amnesia concerning Jews' complicated relationship with whiteness perhaps explains why Mngxitama was able to represent South African Jews simply as whites who were responsible for colonialism, apartheid, and Zionism.

In *Letters of Stone*, I write about both South African Jewish conservatism and the radical fringe. In this current political juncture, the contributions of Jewish radicals such as Slovo, First, Wolpe, Turok, and many others seem to have been forgotten. This is a moment in which idenditarian and African nationalist forms of black consciousness seem to have supplanted the earlier left traditions of internationalism embodied in Jewish radical politics. This is indeed an age of identity politics, ethno-nationalism, and amnesia when it comes to political traditions that recognized the entanglements of Jewish and black historical experience.

Frantz Fanon's famous quote in *Black Skin, White Masks* on the relationship between anti-Semitism and antiblack racism seems to have little resonance at this particular historical juncture. Yet, it is worthwhile reflecting on Fanon's articulation of solidarity between blacks and Jews: "At first glance it seems strange that the attitude of the anti-Semite can be equated with that of the negrophobe. It was my philosophy teacher from the Antilles who reminded me one day: 'When you hear someone insulting the Jews pay attention; he is talking about you.' And I believed at the time he was universally right, meaning that I was responsible in my body and my soul for the fate reserved for my brother. Since then, I have understood that what he meant quite simply was the anti-Semite is inevitably a negrophobe."<sup>20</sup> This is certainly not the Fanon that militant activists such as Mngxitama subscribe to.

20 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008).

There are historically grounded reasons why the fates of Jews and blacks are entangled. One of the main threads of the narrative I weave in *Letters of Stone* is the transnational story of how the foundations of racial science were incubated in the early 1900s in the social laboratories of the German colony of South West Africa. I also narrate how, two decades later, this colonial science traveled to Europe. Drawing on Arendt's "boomerang effect," I show how the seeds of Nazi racial hygiene were planted by Dr Eugen Fischer in his 1908 ethnographic study of the Rehoboth Basters in German South West Africa. The lethal consequences of this study rebounded to the heartland of Europe two decades later when Fischer returned to Berlin to become Hitler's most senior racial scientist. From 1927 to 1942, Fischer was the director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics in Berlin. Researchers at this institute not only participated in the racial classification of Roma, Sinti, and Jews, but were also involved in Nazi euthanasia and compulsory sterilization programs that targeted members of physically, mentally, and racially "inferior" populations. *Letters of Stone* shows how Nazi racial hygiene programs were the outcome of a transnational science that had deep roots in the colonies. These ideas also had a significant impact in apartheid South Africa, including at Stellenbosch University, where I currently teach.

My account of the transnational roots of racial science in *Letters of Stone* questions the zero-sum logic and compartmentalization of collective suffering that have become the ideological bedrock of ethno-nationalist narratives. Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid, for example, were built upon the foundation of the deaths of thousands of Boer women and children in the British concentration camps during the South African War (1899–1902). Likewise, Israeli nationalism continues to be forged on the killing fields of Riga and the death camps of Poland. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission also revealed how the making of the post-apartheid "rainbow nation," as well as more exclusivist forms of African nationalism, find expression through state-sanctioned forms of collective memory of black suffering under colonialism and apartheid. Notwithstanding the sorts of "multidirectional memory" identified by Rothberg or transnational histories of scientific racism that I write about in *Letters of Stone*, it would seem that there is still considerable appeal for zero-sum competitive memory. It also appears that the production of a solid sense of national culture depends upon the production of "pure" ethno-nationalist histories of collective suffering.

*Letters of Stone* was a self-conscious attempt to write against conventional accounts of the Holocaust that see this catastrophic event as a purely European affair. It was the archives I visited and historical accounts I read that revealed to me the thoroughly entangled histories of colonialism and the Holocaust. Learning about the more than one hundred racial laws that my father's family were subjected to in Berlin from 1933 until they were deported in 1943 also resonated in powerful ways with the colonial and apartheid racial laws I was familiar with. The postcolonial intellectual archive—Arendt, Cessaire, Fanon, Memmi, and others—invited me to question the kinds of disciplinary policing and ethno-nationalist scripts that Cheyette and Rothberg allude to. It was the archive of racial science itself that revealed the extent to which eugenics was a traveling theory that respected no national borders. In the early twentieth century, the United States were leaders in the field until Eugen Fischer's Institute in Berlin took over, thanks to generous funding from the Carnegie Institute and Rockefeller Foundation.

Eugenics also provided pro-Nazi “America First” propagandists such as the famous aviator Charles Lindbergh with the scientific evidence needed to demand drastic measures to protect the “superior” Nordic, Germanic, and Anglo-Saxon genes of “Western Europeans.” US advocates of immigration restrictions drew on H. H. Goddard’s 1912 study, which used intelligence tests for identifying the “feeble-minded” among immigrants arriving on Ellis Island. Such studies allowed eugenics activists such as Charles Davenport and Madison Grant to successfully lobby the US Congress to introduce these immigration restrictions. Eugenics went into sharp decline soon after this 1924 legislative victory. A decade later, the Nazi regime used eugenics to justify racial laws to protect “pure Aryan” genetic stock.

In his history of scientific racism in America, *The Legacy of Malthus*, Allan Chase claims that these country quotas prevented an estimated 6 million Southern, Central, and Eastern Europeans from entering the United States from 1924 to 1939. As Stephen Jay Gould concludes in *The Mismeasure of Man*: “We know what happened to many who wanted to leave but had no place to go. The pathways to destruction are often indirect, but ideas can be agents as sure as guns and bombs.”<sup>21</sup>

This tragic transnational history of racial science takes us to our troubled times today, with Teresa May’s Britain, Donald Trump’s America, and the Baltic states becoming increasingly obsessed with policing national boundaries and excluding refugees and migrants. The transnational character of the history of racial science, as well as its persisting legacies, calls for accounts that trouble ethnonational histories and hierarchies of suffering.

Cheyette identifies some of “the political and disciplinary difficulties of bringing together Jewish and postcolonial studies,” yet his literary-centered analysis of the problems with “actionism,” supersessionism, and other rhetorical forms does not adequately engage with the disciplinary formation of Jewish studies in post-World War II period. A serious engagement would require a process of critical reflection on the postwar politics of knowledge production in both postcolonial studies and Jewish studies. In the South African context, this would no doubt require an interrogation of the relationship of Jewish studies with both apartheid and Israel.

Although Cheyette’s call for “thinking actionism” certainly makes sense when it comes to the crude polemics of Andile Mngxitama and Khalid Muhammad, a “thoughtful praxis” in the South African context would require a rigorous and open engagement with the complicated entanglements between South African Jewish and black historical experience. This kind of process could perhaps lay the foundations for a productive scholarly engagement.

21 Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: Norton, 1981).